

Kijiikwewin aji: sweetgrass stories

by

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## Abstract

Kijiikwewin-aji means ‘to become a woman now’ in Algonquin and describes the heart of the research. Sweetgrass stories shares the title of this thesis as it is part of the research methodology used with traditional Indigenous women.

Through grounding myself with Indigenous Grassroots Theory, the creation of an Algonquin Indigenist paradigm and my relationship with knowledge, I formed an Indigenous research methodology called sweetgrass story weaving which focuses on traditional Indigenous women as they share their moontime stories. Within this thesis, I also share information relating to the historical roots and present state of rites of passage with traditional Indigenous women and discuss the research journey using the concept of ethical space.

Using an international, national and grassroots level focus on strength, resilience and power, you will read traditional Indigenous women’s voices as they look back through lived experiences; hope and determination when looking forward to the future, and the shared theme of wanting their cultural traditions and ceremonies to live on through future generations of Indigenous girls and women, including young men. What is the current state of the Berry Fast, understanding the assimilative nature of colonization and the effects it has had on Indigenous women? How can we continue to honour these rites of passage while living in a world both with traditional Indigenous worldviews and colonial constructs?

I propose the introduction of a sweetgrass knowledge transfer model for the Berry Fast using the transferrable characteristics harvested from my research methodology. This knowledge transfer model has the capacity to increase accessibility and decrease the difficulty in completing the Berry Fast in order for traditional Indigenous women to complete it in the present day. Furthermore, the introduction of the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model for the Berry Fast can

assist with framing the perspective of Indigenous women as powerful beings who elicit respect and an equal place in contemporary society. Over time, the collective strength and wisdom of traditional Indigenous women will increase which is a step in the decolonized direction of preventative health care which promotes *mino bimaadiziwin*<sup>1</sup>.

## Keywords

Berry Fast, rites of passage, Indigenous Grassroots Theory, Algonquin Indigenist paradigm, sweetgrass story weaving, Indigenous research methodology, traditional Indigenous women

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<sup>1</sup> Mino bimaadiziwin: the good life.

<sup>2</sup> First Nation, Anishinaabe, Native, Aboriginal, and Indian

<sup>3</sup> Seven Stages of Life is a trajectory model of how one lives through various stages with the ideal that they strive to

## Acknowledgements

I have never walked this academic journey alone. There have been many times when I would sit in front of my computer and feel alone, but then I remember all of the hard work that everyone put into this thesis and I kept going.

Chi-miigwetch to my own moontime which has cycled several times since I started on this academic journey. My moontime is a monthly reminder of my strength as an Algonquin Anishinaabe kwe, and why I believe so strongly in rites of passage for young Indigenous girls.

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## **Chapter One: Surveying/Transplanting Sweetgrass**

### **Background.**

Throughout this thesis, I will be using varying terms<sup>2</sup> to describe Indigenous peoples to honour the original authors' terms within their own scholarly work and also to highlight the diversity used to define the many different nations within Turtle Island.

As we move through the chapters, the processes of sweetgrass picking will mirror the academic style needed to meet the program standards of a doctoral level thesis. I choose to respect the academic format while also honouring my own roots as an Algonquin woman by including my own Indigenous traditional knowledge and beliefs. I also chose this format to show other Indigenous peoples they are able to include their epistemology within their own scholarly work, and see themselves reflected in it. Also, as you move through the chapters, my style of writing will change back and forth from formal to informal with references to myself in the first person, and also personal stories. This allows a larger audience to access my thesis for different reasons. Some may skip the academic sections and connect with the informality of the writing, while others may see the formal academic writing as a base and see that informal/formal writing fit well together as an avenue connecting theory to practice.

This thesis was completed with traditional Indigenous women and in order to stay true to the traditional aspect I will be arranging the chapters through the perspective of sweetgrass as medicine. Kimmerer (2013) writes about Indigenous knowledge, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants as an Indigenous botanist. She borrows sweetgrass; its teachings and significance as the framework for sharing the stories of plants and Indigenous teachings. My research is not focused on plants, but on other living beings: traditional Indigenous women. My research also incorporates Indigenous teachings and stories similar to Kimmerer, though the

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<sup>2</sup> First Nation, Anishinaabe, Native, Aboriginal, and Indian

difference is the focus; the focus of this thesis is the resilience and strength of traditional Indigenous women, their moontime, and future generations.

In Chapter One, Surveying/Transplanting Sweetgrass, I will share information on the Berry Fast, the importance discovered in my past research, provide a literature review of the historical roots of rites of passages for Indigenous girls to provide a broad perspective, and highlight the spiritual and emotional value it continues to bring to Indigenous women and girls in this present day. This literature selection and review can be seen as surveying sweetgrass; viewing the literature and transplanting it into this thesis. I will also share my epistemology and ontology as a traditional Indigenous woman and the teachings I carry that have been transplanted to me from my family and traditional people within my life. The original seed or teachings have come from a long line of traditional Indigenous peoples and have grown weaker and stronger along the way. This is similar to transplanting the medicine sweetgrass in order for it to survive and not perish; the environment it grows in changes although the heart of the teachings remain the same. I also use the chapter to situate myself holistically: physical location, mental and emotional location, and also spiritually. In the last part of the first chapter, I will introduce my theoretical framework.

The second chapter titled Harvesting Sweetgrass shifts into a new research paradigm where I discuss my research methodology: sweetgrass story weaving. The Indigenous methodology that I used to research with traditional Indigenous women can be seen as a tool to harvest the sweetgrass which encompasses the use of an ethical space, research standards, and the importance of Indigenous storytelling. Within the context of harvesting, culturally appropriate tools and assistance were used to harvest stories with traditional Indigenous women using the sweetgrass story weaving methodology. I will also introduce Lisa Osawamick who

assisted in the collection of stories from traditional Indigenous women and was instrumental in the research assistance needed.

In Chapter Three, the Braiding Sweetgrass analogy is shared through the results of the stories which the traditional Indigenous women discussed. The results are divided into three sections: *Looking Back*, *In the Present*, and *Looking Ahead*. The first section looks at what each traditional Indigenous woman experienced during their first moontime. In the second section, the traditional Indigenous women shared their thoughts on what they would have liked to do for their first moontime if they did not celebrate it. In the final section, the traditional Indigenous women share their wishes for future generations of Indigenous women and girls within the context of their moontime. The braiding of the results is shown in this section through the Body, Mind, and Spirit aspects. Within each section, the traditional Indigenous women share their experiences and thoughts which, when read, form the braid of a sweetgrass: Body, Mind, and Spirit.

The fourth chapter, Talking Sweetgrass begins with setting a context that will honour traditional Indigenous women through the honesty of their current situation. This chapter will relate to traditional Indigenous women from an international and national level with a focus on strength, resilience, and empowerment. I will further discuss how Indigenous women's empowerment has the ability to slowly enhance their role and place in society. I will also share how levels of accessibility and difficulty in completing rites of passages affect the delivery and its impact on Indigenous women. Furthermore, I will explore the contrast between what these traditional Indigenous women shared as they look forward to future generations within the current landscape, and discuss the next steps which these traditional Indigenous women would like to do to change it. To conclude the chapter, I will share limitations of this research. The

title of this chapter represents the medicine of the sweetgrass and the power it holds and also that of the holder of the sweetgrass. The results have been provided in Chapter Three, so this chapter provides a time to hold the sweetgrass results and discuss the implications it may have on present and future traditional Indigenous women/girls, and what can be done to implement their recommendations.

The final chapter, Gifting Sweetgrass incorporates the future direction of this aspect of spiritual health with traditional Indigenous women's recommendations, future areas of study from a community based standpoint, and what this thesis brings to the new and ever-changing landscape of the Berry Fast through a sweetgrass knowledge transfer model. I will conclude with a symbolic tying of the sweetgrass braid to pass on to others when they are finished reading this thesis.

## **Introduction.**

As I watched my daughter come up the stairs after her ten-day seclusion as part of her Berry Fast, my heart swelled with pride. I watched her as she circled the room in her blue-ribbon dress and thought the last ten days were worth it for her. I looked at her beaded leather bag which hung across her chest and swung at her hip as she walked. She beamed with pride as she hugged family members and there was warmth in the room, which felt comforting and safe. We welcomed many visitors in our home during her seclusion, making sure we had tobacco to offer the women who sat with her and talked, cedar tea on the stove for afterwards when they would join us at the kitchen table, and ensuring my daughter was taken care of through it all. I had the help of my mother and sister during this time as I was in school and working part-time.

As the year passed and she broke her fast with Elder Mary Elliott, I reminisced about the hardships she endured that year for her family, community and nation. I also thought about all of the preparation, mentoring, and resources required to assist a young Indigenous woman through this particular rite of passage. As an Algonquin woman living in Ojibwe territory, I was far from familiar resources and was unsure who to reach out to when my daughter started her first moontime. This is what sparked my interest in researching rites of passage for traditional Indigenous women almost ten years ago. There was some difficulty involved in accessing this rite of passage and although I knew about it, discussed it with my daughter who agreed to do it when her first moontime arrives; when the time came I still searched for a woman Elder to place my daughter on her Berry Fast.

My master's research was about the lived experience of Algonquin and Ojibwe female adolescents and their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. I wanted to expand on this research by including traditional Indigenous women of all ages in the surrounding



Sudbury, Ontario, Canada area and delving deeper into their experiences and desires for future generations.

My current research is on the rites of passage focusing on traditional Indigenous women's stories from the past, present, and what they want for future generations of Indigenous women in the area of traditional Indigenous spiritual health. Although there are many rites of passage which occur all over the world, this research will focus mostly on the Berry Fast. This occurs when a young girl transitions to a young woman at her first moontime. I will provide a historical perspective of rites of passage, share the present significance, spiritual value, and importance of not only the revival of this time-honoured puberty rite, but also propose implementation in the contemporary world and its utility.

### **Historical view of rites of passage.**

Historically, Indigenous societies in North America were characterized by relative equality between women and men. Although women and men had distinct roles and responsibilities in their societies evidenced by divided tasks among gender lines, both were valued, respected and exemplified a sense of balance (NWAC, 2007; Anderson, 2006). Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere-Lavell (2006) asserts historically, within matriarchal Indigenous structures, women were not dependent solely upon their spouses which ensured they were not vulnerable to violence, abuse, and domination. However, they do not want anyone to fall prey to romantic tendencies that portray pre-contact Indigenous communities as utopian societies; it is important to point out that both women and men toiled hard to ensure their collective survival (pp. 5).

Hammersmith (2010) also shares her views on matriarchal societies with the inclusion of egalitarianism.

Matriarchal or egalitarian systems were based on positive values of equality and caring in human relations, most importantly at the community and family level, and on respect for the environment, referred to as Mother Earth. Much emphasis was placed on kinship, and the interdependency of female and male roles was crucial for survival (pp. 125).

As part of their defined role of Indigenous women in their communities, they worked collectively within their communities to ensure their survival, and also the passing down of culture and traditions to the next generation. A part of this is the rites of passage that young Indigenous girls would experience when they began their first moontime.

Densmore (1979) writes about puberty customs for girls with over twenty years of direct experience in observing Chippewa culture. Although her work is not specific to only puberty rites, she did include it in her writing as part of overall Chippewa culture, with the inclusion of over sixty Chippewa informants. One informant, Odinigun shared that the puberty custom included a four-day seclusion in a small wigwam away from the family lodge for the young woman. She was to fast fully while she was in seclusion and only to return to her family lodge when her moontime stopped flowing. At that time during the first summer, the young woman was not to eat fruit, berries, or vegetables with the first fruit being a strawberry. The young woman was not to break this fast until the Old Midewiwin and other community members were invited by her parents. The Old Midewiwin, parents, community members, and the young woman each had a bowl of berries as he performed the following ceremony. The Old Midewiwin would offer the fresh fruit to the young woman who would refuse it four times and accept on the fifth time. Odinigun shared with Densmore (1979) that this was a great trial for the young woman as she hungered for the fresh fruit, but the teaching from this ceremony is patience and discipline. This ceremony was repeated for each season with the bowl of food dependent on the season.

Hilger (1992) shares the puberty rites as part of her ethnographic research with Chippewa people in the 1930s. She was able to complete fieldwork with over 95 people as they lived life on their respective reserves. She shared the puberty rites of young Chippewa women in the Minnesota area. Each young woman upon commencement of her moontime would build their own bakane ga (a tent made by herself; living by herself) which is a menstrual wigwam she would stay in over the next four to ten days. During this seclusion, the young Chippewa woman would eat once a day, but never any food in season with the reasoning that the harvest would wither away. The young woman's hair was tied away from her face and she was instructed by her female relatives to not touch herself. If she wanted to touch herself to scratch her hair or body she was able to use a small stick. During her seclusion, she was to prepare her own food and use only her own dishes.

In some groups, Hilger (1992) noted that the custom was for the young women to carry their own dishes for the full year which is marked by the start of their first moontime. Idleness during isolation was taboo, as the new young woman was instructed to sew or bead. The mother would visit her daughters and inform them of their new role as women and the work expected of them. After the seclusion, the young Chippewa woman would wash and bathe herself as her female relatives prepared her father's hunt. The newly minted young woman was free to mingle with the community members and would only be freed when a community member would give a portion of food to her. In another community (Lac Courte Orielle Reservation) the young woman would wait until everyone else had eaten, and then she would be handed food that was in season for her to consume. Another custom from the Vermilion area was that before the young woman was able to eat, an older man in the community would make a speech. After the speech, the young woman would gather what was in season, eat a small portion of charcoal then the food

that she gathered. The custom also states that the young woman was to do this else, she would spoil whatever her community members were gathering at that time.

Hilger (1992) further shares that after the initial seclusion for the women, they were watched closely by older female relatives until they were married, and were never allowed to sleep at other people's homes. One elderly women from Red Lake Reservation shared: "I was never allowed to go out alone after I was that way the first time" (pp. 53).

Child's (2012) work as an historian of archival information shares how young Ojibwe women in the Leech Lake area, were prepared for their ceremonies that took place at first menstruation: fasting, seclusion, and female mentoring. Female relatives would visit the young woman in seclusion, and share the developmental changes to expect, societal responsibilities she would be incurring, along with the responsibility of being a life giver. The time of contemplation during seclusion and rituals conclude with a feast where community members were offered berries. Child (2012) believes "the suspension of normal activities and isolation that characterized this rite of passage was not regarded as penance or punishment; it was an occasion that affirmed, comforted, and empowered young women at a moment of change and insecurity (pp. 6). After the seclusion was complete and the young woman returned to regular daily life there was social prohibitions placed upon them for a year which concluded with a short fast, followed by the ritual eating of strawberries. The demanding rituals associated with puberty involved considerable time and commitment by the young woman and other female relatives. This ritual involving the first menstruation represents, "...a highly meaningful coming-of-age symbolizing a woman's power to give life that is first and foremost associated with the powers of the universe, and therefore linked to the rest of the community (pp. 8).

Powers (1980) shares a summary of a girl's puberty rite called Isnati Awicalowanpi which translates to 'they sing over her [first] menses'. At menarche, a young Oglala woman would be secluded alone in a new tipi outside the camp circle. An older kinswoman or another female would attend to her needs and instruct her in her new duties as a potential wife and mother. After ten days, the community would hold a Buffalo ceremony at the request of the girl's father to invoke the spirit of the buffalo and secure for the initiate the virtues most desired in an Oglala woman, and also to announce to the people that the girl was now a woman.

The day before the ceremony the young woman's mother and her female relatives built another tipi to serve as a ceremonial lodge for Isnati Awicalowanpi. During the ceremony, the shaman prayed as he smoked the pipe which he then passed around to the people gathered in and around the lodge. The young woman was brought into the lodge and instructed by the shaman to sit cross-legged-as men and children sit-between the altar and the fireplace. The shaman then prayed and following this the woman was instructed to sit in a different manner, with her legs bent, together and placed at the side. She now was sitting like a woman but the arrangement of her hair and her dress are still a girl's. The young woman was then told to remove her dress, and her mother was instructed to arrange her hair so that it fell in front like a woman's.

He tied an eagle plume in her hair and gave her a staff of cherry wood. Her mother removed the belt that held the menstrual bundle and the ceremony would end with giveaways and a feast in the girl's honour (pp. 57, 59, 61). Although Powers (1980) description was much more in depth, I chose not to include the prayers shared and words of the shaman to show respect for the ceremony.

From a historical perspective, rites of passages for Indigenous women at their first moontime placed them in a secure and well-respected position within their family, community,

and nation systems. Looking at the historical and contemporary relationships that are found among Indigenous women with a focus on traditional knowledge, Waldram, Herring and Young (2006) note the rich oral traditions of Indigenous peoples which have linked the existence of peoples with specific regions and defined both material and spiritual places. Their sense of place and of relationships to the land and animals is perpetually rooted in these traditions.

When the family, community, and nations' systems and worldviews were encroached upon, deemed uncivilized, and were subsequently forced to assimilate to the colonizer's worldview, then the systems suffocated and parts within it become unhealthy. In Canada, Brascoupe and Waters (2009) share that Aboriginal people have experienced a history of colonization, and cultural and social assimilation through the residential schools' program and other policies, leading to historical trauma and the loss of cultural cohesion (pp. 7).

Colonization completely disrupted the Aboriginal "circle of life" (Smylie, 2001), especially for Aboriginal women when North America was colonized, gender roles were redefined with the imposition of European laws (Boyer, 2006). In order to gain control of the vast resources and land of the New World, the systems imposed by the newcomers had to suppress existing Indigenous structures based on these values (Hammersmith, 2010).

The colonial constructs include, but are not limited to: eras of the Indian Act (Richmond & Cook, 2016), child welfare (Blackstock, Trocme & Bennett, 2004), residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Report, 2015), and the present crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (Olsen Harper, 2006). Although, understandably some Indigenous women are on a different path and are dealing with adversity in other ways, there are many Indigenous women who are successful. There are many terms to define success and I have chosen to define traditional Indigenous success as Indigenous women who are successful as they retain and

enhance their traditional roles, teachings, and customs and pass them onto the next generation; they are the ones who manoeuvre around institutional policies to ensure their rights as Indigenous women are recognized; they are the outspoken ones who are at rallies and protests; they are the quiet ones who observe; they are the ones who live without mind-altering substances in order to clearly feel the connection to Mother Earth and the Creator; and they are also the ones struggling while still taking care of their children, themselves, and each other.

In summary, rites of passages for Indigenous women; those who experience them, learn to perform them, or are helpers in the ritual are assisting women (and men) in stepping towards decolonization via mino-bimaadiziwin. An important step in mino-bimaadiziwin is restoring our existing rites of passages so Indigenous girls can engender a stronger sense of cultural identity and their role on Mother Earth. I will discuss the present view of rites of passage, specifically the Berry Fast for traditional Indigenous women in the next section along with the value and importance in today's world.

### **Present view of rites of passage.**

The Berry Fast is a rite of passage embarked upon by Indigenous girls with the onset of menarche. Ojibwe Elder, Liza Mosher-bun, shares that a young woman fasts from strawberries and other berries for a full year when she gets her moontime. During this year, she spends time with grandmothers who teach her about womanhood and how to bring life into the world. She also gathers berries, which she will present to her community when she finishes her fast. Hence, she learns how to care for and sustain her people (Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012). Although there is not an abundance of scholarly literature of the rites of passage from a contemporary perspective, there are pioneers out there. Anderson (2000) describes a rite of passage, specifically the Berry Fast ceremony:

The ceremony starts out with a big feast in the spring, where girls come together with their female family friends as well as a number of women who are to play the traditional role of 'auntie' to them ... The girls then hear from each of the aunties who have assembled, who encourage and talk to them about some of the challenges they will face, both during the fast and as they enter the world as women ... Thus begins a thirteen moon (month) period during which the young women are expected to refrain from eating berries or berry products ... They are told not to dance during this period, not to date, not to step over men, nor to pick up babies. At the end of this period, they come back to the circle of aunties, and are sent out on to the land for twenty-four hours to do a fast. When they come off the fast, they are bathed in cedar-drenched water, dressed in their finest, and introduced as the new women of the community to the aunties and family members who are attending the ceremony (pp. 386-387).

Decontie (2014) also shares information about the Berry Fast in the present day:

The Berry Fast duration is a full year (four seasons). A young girl lives a strict disciplined lifestyle to role model herself after Mother Earth, to prepare to be like her when she is a woman giving life in the future. There are a number of things they cannot do with the understanding that they are contributing to strengthening future life ... The Berry Fast is not viewed as a list of things one cannot participate in, but as an honourable spiritual calling, a life stage journey. It is also a time for young girls to begin learning important lessons such as giving and receiving, and the different spiritual meanings of life, including passed down oral teachings of their ancestors. The choice the young girls make in giving up the berries for all of life creations and future generations remains important in continuing on Anishnabe culture (pp. 8, 9).

As you can read, the focus of the present literature is not on the how-to-do-a-berry-fast, but more on how the Berry Fast impacts and affects the young women themselves, and the connection to family and community. You can see the shift in writing from the descriptive functions of rites of passage to the experience and value in more contemporary literature. There is an interconnectedness of the Berry Fast, the moon cycles, childbirth and water that is an essential part of traditional Indigenous women's cultural identity. Another integral part of Indigenous women's identity is the continued importance of their traditional roles and responsibilities. Bédard (2008) writes about how "women are connected to the water in Nishnaabeg culture, they have an intimate connection with water because of their ability to bring forth life" (pp. 98), and it is their responsibility to be "keepers of the water" or the "caretakers of



water” (pp. 99). These rites of passage ceremonies help to nurture confidence and build healthy self-esteem as young people learn about the changes that are happening within, they also learn about their roles and responsibilities (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010). The Berry Fast also enhances Algonquin and Ojibwe female adolescents’ understanding of their traditional role as Anishnaabe kweg (Aboriginal women), culturally constructs a path upon which they follow, and strengthens their connection to Mother Earth and Creator (Wabie, 2011, pp. i). Furthermore, Wabie (2011) believes:

With the Berry Fast being a part of the traditional resurgence of Aboriginal people within Turtle Island; traditional activities, ceremonies, and teachings have a potential to reach more and more people. Aboriginal people on Turtle Island have lived according to their traditions and culture since the beginning to time. With the disruption that occurred with assimilation strategies, the presently different levels of assimilated Aboriginal peoples, and the untouched knowledge that is transferred orally through respected Aboriginal peoples within Turtle Island, there is a resurgence occurring that may swing the pendulum of knowledge back to total immersion of culture, then settling in the middle where Mino-Bimaadiziwin (Good Life) can be found (p. 70).

There is a reliance on oral tradition within most Indigenous communities, and sometimes a hesitance to share such intimate parts of the Berry Fast. As I have become familiar with Elder Mary Elliott throughout the years, I have sat with her many times discussing this rite of passage among other things. Mary Elliott is from Atikameksheng Anishinawbek in Naughton, Ontario, Canada. She is of the Turtle Clan family and has three daughters and seven grandchildren. It was her late mother who passed on the knowledge, customs and traditions to her, which she calls Anishinawbe Bimaadiziwin. Mary’s daughters, her two grandchildren; a grandson and granddaughter have completed their puberty fast, and she has put several young women on their Berry Fast in northern Ontario, Canada.

She is consistent in her belief that these traditions should not be written down on paper for others to misinterpret or use improperly. She believes it is imperative that if one is looking

for these traditions, they are able to find them. As an esteemed Elder and friend, I choose to follow the same path as her. You will not find a how-to guide on Berry Fasting in this thesis; what you will find is the importance of the rite of passage itself from literature and traditional Indigenous women. You will also find recommendations from the traditional Indigenous women interviewed on how to continue this age-old rite of passage.

There are many ways in which we can care for the next generation; one way is to ensure they have the traditional women teachings given to them, and the opportunity to participate in their respective rites of passage. Although rites of passage may seem like a small act, it encompasses more than a yearlong fast; it joins women together in strength, allows for spiritual health to flourish, and gives the young women the tools to respect themselves, their traditional roles and also the role they have on Mother Earth.

Simpson (2011) discusses stories of Indigenous re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence to transform Indigenous peoples' relationship to the Canadian state. Within Simpson's (2011) book, Edna Manitowabi shares her views on women's rites of passage and her responsibility as a traditional grandmother:

The time has come for me as a Grandmother, a teacher, and a great Grandmother to pass these [teachings] onto the next generation of women. I have taken up this work and these responsibilities and now I must remember these teachings, wear them, and pass them on to the younger generation of women who are now coming into that power time as a new woman spirit... This is particularly important now as our Mother Earth is going through her own cleansing. We reflect this cleansing when we renew ourselves with these teachings, ceremonies, fasting, and our rites of passage. We need to pass on the teachings of the sacredness of water that sustains us, the air that we breathe, and the fire within us, so that our next generation of women have an understanding of what is happening to them during this powerful transition (pp.36)

We need to help young people maintain this relationship and these teachings, because that connection is the umbilical cord to all of Creation. When our young women understand this, they will understand their own seasons, cycles, and moods. They will understand that they are sacred and beautiful. They will understand that they must take care of themselves, and that they are the mothers to generations yet to be born (pp. 37).

The role of traditional Indigenous women is vital to the continuance of their Indigenous teachings, traditions, and the next generations of Indigenous girls and women. Indigenous rites of passage for young women arrive at a time when they are transitioning from children to young women; this is the time when their Indigenous traditions should be reaffirmed and importance placed upon their relationship with other women as life and care givers of family, community, nation, and Mother Earth.

Thundercloud, an Algonquin kwe from Kitigan Zibi First Nation in Quebec, Canada shared with Anderson (2006) that early childhood reinforcement of identity can provide a lifetime of resistance. Understanding the importance of identity and the movement of Indigenous people on and off reserve, Applegate Krouse and Howard-Bobiwash (2003) discuss how Indigenous women adapt their traditional approaches and concepts into their modern contexts of city life which provide foundational strength to their urban community. Also, “this strength is found in networks and organizations that are often the backbone of urban Native communities which reveal theoretical insights on the power dynamics of gender, race and class in culturally adapting to urbanization” (pp. 489). As Indigenous women, we can reclaim our rites of passages as one of the many steps in decolonizing ourselves, families, communities and nations as we live mino-bimaadiziwin. Hammersmith (2010) shares that strengthening the participation of Indigenous women and restoring their respected and honoured roles in Indigenous communities may well be the single most important factor in ensuring the wellbeing of the community and a healthy return to Indigenous people being in charge of themselves.

## **Value**

Traditionally, when young girls experienced their first moontime (menarche) there were older women who gave these young girls an understanding of what their new roles were as

Indigenous women. This resulted in a shift of individual, family, community roles and responsibilities that allowed the young girls to adhere to their new identity. This is the cultural identity that Indigenous women are reclaiming, passing onto the next generation, or who might be struggling within the mainstream society for a myriad of reasons.

This thesis discusses Indigenous women and their respective rites of passages, but also showcases the resilience of Indigenous peoples throughout years of oppression and colonization and the importance of continuing it for future generations. The rite of passage remains intact although somewhat modified from its original version shared by Densmore (1979), Hilger (1992), Child (2012), and Powers (1980). The identification and employment of rites of passage can help guide young women through the enhancement or illumination of their sense of independence and self-worth which can be seen as resilience.

As part of this resilience, the value in this rite of passage is there are still traditional Indigenous grandmothers and aunts in many communities with the ability to assist and train others on this intimate and profound ceremony:

Bringing people ‘back’ to practising ceremonial ways is seen as a healing process from the trauma encountered by First Nations peoples in Canada, as well as a way to both maintain our connection to the land and water, and to keep that same land and water safe for future generations (Olson, 2012, pp. 120).

As Hilger (1992) noted in her research there were modifications made to the puberty rites for young girls as they moved onto reservations. Some young women were kept upstairs in the homes, made to stay alone and not leave the home while also not looking or touching anything, while homes of grandmothers raising their grandchildren had puberty wigwams built near them.

The modification of ceremony and tradition was necessary as it was illegal to perform ceremonies under the Indian Act. Ralston Saul (2014) describes Section 140 in the 1927 Indian

Act “as a clear and intentional act of evil” (pp. 208). According to this particular section, which was repealed in 1951: “any Indian or other person who engages in any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony...is guilty of an offense and is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months” (pp. 208, 209). Wabie (2011) writes that although these ceremonies still took place underground sporadically; the passing down of ceremonies, dances and festivals diminished significantly (pp. 1).

This is again where the resilience of Indigenous women shines as the rites of passage ceremony, although somewhat modified, is still alive today. There are some traditional Indigenous women who hold this knowledge and are able to pass it down to the next generation. One of the issues may be the avenue to pass the knowledge down may not be known by all who wish to participate. This issue is worth looking at and will be discussed in the recommendation section from the traditional Indigenous women who participated in the research.

As the women look back on their lives and their first moontime, they have the lived experience to look forward to the next generations and share what they want for them. Although the rites of passage experience may look like a minor experience in their life, it shapes young Indigenous women’s lives with the belief and understanding they are sacred beings with the ability to give life and care for others, including Mother Earth.

As I continue, it is important to situate myself and allow the reader to understand my views on knowledge, where it came from, and how I will frame my research. Understanding my history, my views may help you, the reader, understand why I completed the research in the manner I did and also why I highlighted the importance of the Berry Fast and all it entails.

**Situating myself.**

In order to situate myself and my theoretical framework, I will explain my epistemological/ontological perspective which I use as a guide. It is important to situate myself from an epistemological and ontological perspective for the reader to understand where I have been and where I am coming from. I will discuss my thinking process behind the creation of an Algonquin Indigenist paradigm and my relationship with knowledge. Lastly, I will present an Indigenous framework using the Seven Grandfather Teachings that can corroborate my viewpoint about my epistemology/ontology and how it can be used as a tool to ensure research be completed in a good way (See Appendix 1, Seven Grandfather teachings approach to research).

**Algonquin Indigenist Paradigm.**

The Algonquin Indigenist paradigm supports the concept of interconnectivity. My relationship is that of family, community, and nation, I initially utilized portions of Burrell & Morgan's (1979) interpretive and radical humanist paradigms, where I observed a parallel between certain elements of each to assist in the formation of the Algonquin Indigenist paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is informed by a concern to realize the original nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience. It seeks explanation within the area of individual consciousness within the frame of reference of the participant rather than the observer of action (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, pp. 28).

The radical humanist paradigm shares a common concern for the release of consciousness and experience from domination by various aspects of the superstructures of the social world. It also seeks to change the social world through a change in modes of cognition and consciousness. The radical humanist worldview places emphasis on radical change, emancipation, and

potentiality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, pp. 32). As I looked at these paradigms, I came to the realization of the futility of validating an Algonquin Indigenist paradigm within two mainstream ones.

The interpretive and radical humanist paradigms have many similarities which allow the method of integration to have a seamless quality to them. There were certain elements of these two paradigms which provided me with a starting point to help formulate an academic description of my Algonquin Indigenist paradigm. As I described the relevant parts of the radical humanist and interpretive paradigms from my Indigenous epistemology and ontology, they were inadequate to fully present the fullness of the Algonquin Indigenist paradigm I situate myself in.

1. Realize the original nature of the social world.

My worldview of the original nature of the social world is that we are all interconnected; from the plants to the animals, to the land and the people. Hjartarson (1995) conceives that the nature of the social world can extend past what is tangible. She further believes that we are all members of larger circles of life which include the family, the community, the world, and the universe (pp. ii). I am connected to these larger circles of life which give me a sense of belonging and also a strong base on which to live my life.

My family consists of my husband and children, but also extends to encompass my parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and my many cousins. Each of the people in my family have their place in my life, albeit daily interactions or only seeing them at family events. This is also a way that you are defined in the sense of community. "...the notion of extended family continues to be a powerful ideal etched deep in the psyche of Aboriginal people" (Castellano, 2002 as cited in Goudreau, 2006). To further explain, my community consists of my urban

community and also when I go back home. When I am in the urban community I am a professional, and also a student. When I return home to my community, I am Joe and Rose Ann Wabie's girl. There is no importance placed upon formal education and profession; it has more to do with your lineage and direct contributions to the community.

Chief Seattle said that humankind is but one thread in the web of life. The connection to the world and universe is when the teaching of humility can truly be learned. Humility is one of the Seven Grandfather teachings, and according to Benton-Banai (1988), "humility is to know yourself as a sacred part of creation" (pp. 61). If we are but one thread in the web of life, this places a vital connection between the plants, animals, land, humankind, Spirit World, dreams, and the universe.

In order to understand this connection, I realize that the imposed structure of the social world with what is deemed vital to our survival is not the original structure I strive to live in. The original structure that I strive to live in is not in material items, quantity of friends, or the concept of time. The original structure that I strive to live in is being connected to family, community, land but also accepting humility in understanding that I have a connection to the world and universe.

2. Release of consciousness and experience from domination by various aspects of the social world.

### **Indigenous ontology.**

I believe we can live without all of the things that are deemed necessary in the social world and media. I do not believe it is imperative I have material items to be happy or fulfilled. Many of the material articles that give us a false sense of fulfillment that can be taken away from us when there is something newer being advertised. I believe it is important to be happy without



any tangible items. This is the kind of implicit happiness that makes me feel complete as a person, and no one can take that away from me.

I also have a deeper belief in the concept of time that we all should be allowed to live at our own pace. My personal view on time is that I choose to live with it, but not be ruled by it. I believe that I am on a path that I should be on; so, to try and compete with time is futile. To do so would interrupt the natural flow of events. “Indian time is often a misunderstood concept and has fallen prey to the Eurocentric notion that it means one is always late. On the contrary, Indian time means “the right time” and is hardly ever linear. It is cyclical and understands life to be always in motion and in constant flux” (Little Bear, 2000, pp.78 as cited in Victor, 2007, pp. 30).

Another concept of time is my moontime and its cycles. This is a time to reflect, and tune into my spiritual and creative side. I am at my most powerful during this time, and I treat it with honour and dignity by not holding sacred and ceremonial objects that don’t belong to me. I sit on the outside of sharing and teaching circles not because I am tainted, but because I am giving my powerful medicine to Mother Earth and it is respectful to others. I am able to live my life with my moontime, its cycle; along with living in contemporary society with school, work, and family responsibilities. Also, when I am out in the bush with nothing but the land and the sky to determine what I will do is another way of shaking off my self-imposed social constraints. I eat when I am hungry, wake up when the sun is up, go to bed when the sun goes down, and am productive when I feel like it or need something to ensure my livelihood, eg. cutting wood for the fire, setting and checking traps for food, going to the lake for water, et cetera.

Through the Spirit World and its connection to humankind through dreams and animals; the world and the universe are not as it seems. To grasp the concept of the Spirit World and its connection, one has to expand their mind and believe there is more out there than meets the eye.

Simpson (2011) believes “modern society looks for meaning in tangible objects (books, computer) while Indigenous cultures understand and produce meaning through engagement, presence, and process....it also requires the support of the spiritual world which intervenes through our dreams” (pp.93).

When I pray to the Creator, I do so by putting tobacco down on the earth. I hold the tobacco in my left hand because it is closest to my heart, and then give thanks. I am engaged using my mind to focus on the here and now, my presence is directly linked to the Creator because my feet are touching the earth and I am holding a sacred medicine in my hand. The process is through thought (giving thanks, connecting the medicine to my heart and my heart to the Creator), and also the act of placing the tobacco on the ground. All of this connects the Mind, Body, Spirit, and land.

Another belief that I hold is the sacredness of dreaming. I dream of relatives (ones that are still here and others who have passed on), situations that have been part of my day, avenues in life that I do not dare explore, and of things that I never think of in my waking existence. Million (2011) describes dreaming as an effort to make sense of relations in the world that we live in, and also to emphasize our relationships that we have within the past, present, and the future without boundaries of linear time. She further illustrates that dreaming is a sacred activity that acts as a form of communication which can allow us to bypass all the neat little boxes that obscure larger relations and syntheses of imagination.

As Million (2011) stated above about dreaming; it is an effort to emphasize our relationships that we have within the past, present, and the future without boundaries of linear time. I know when I dream about my father who is in the Spirit World he is not physically here but I let my mind believe it so I can spend time with him. I understand the boundaries of linear

time are not being followed, and that other types of time can exist. I have had dreams of my kokum (grandmother) also and of other relatives, some that are still with us and others that are not.

The Spirit World also has its connection with animals. Pierre and Long Soldier (1995) share that some humans are thought to be the spirit of the animal and others are thought to be human spirits who call themselves by an animal name. The authors further believe that plants and animals are intelligent and have a way of communicating with one another as well as humans.

In order to release my consciousness and experience from domination by various aspects of the social world, I need to realize that I am a part of my family and community; but also, the world and the universe. When I came to the realization that I am a miniscule part of the world and universe, it was very humbling. To describe my moment of true awareness was like holding my breath for so long and then finally being able to let it go. Presently, I have an easier understanding of time because it keeps going no matter how I approach it, an ability to appreciate the sacredness of my dreaming, ability to be happy as a person and not for the material things that I have, and also for the true friends that I have made over the span of my life journey. I believe that the universe is never-ending; that the Spirit World is connected with it, and I am blessed with being able to experience a few glimpses of beloved travellers that move back and forth.

3. Seeks explanation within the area of individual consciousness from the person experiencing it, not the observer.

All of the informed perspectives and experiences that I have shared have been written down and shared in this section of my thesis with the reader from a subjective standpoint. The action of the perspectives and experiences in my mind primarily processes what I have seen, felt,

heard, smelled, and quite possibly tasted. Secondly, it forms themes in my mind about what is relevant or not; I then discard what I don't need and keep the important thematic perspectives and experiences. Thirdly, when I am ready to verbalize or produce the experiences and perspectives they most often form a visual representation first. Following this visual representation, I can then begin to expand on the areas which need to be explained using words.

In turn, the reader then digests what is written and interprets it through his/her perspective. The art of the communication is words typed on paper, but the act itself is very subjective. I need to clearly and concisely explain my perspectives and experiences so the person reading the text will subjectively interpret it closer to my individual intent. I am fully aware that written, verbal or visual communication between people will always have a degree of misinterpretation; it is attempting to minimize the misinterpretation so the original intent is still fairly clear.

4. Seeks to change the social world through a change in modes of cognition and consciousness.

William Commanda-bun, an Algonquin Elder from Kitigan Zibi defines epistemology as the Indian way (Hjartarson, 1995). Commanda-bun is a perfect example of living life the Indian way. His vision consisted of gathering people from all races and nations dedicated in establishing a culture of peace through his foundation, Circle of All Nations. He was also holder of three wampum belts: 1) the Seven Fires Prophecy belt, 2) the 1700's belt, and 3) the Jay Treaty Border Crossing belt. Sherman (2008), an Algonquin [Omámiwinini] scholar shares with us the meaning behind wampum belts: Wampum belts are "Cultural documents...that were passed down between Omámiwinini people and the French and the English, linking them in relationships that had corresponding responsibilities" (Sherman, 2008, p.122). Weaver (2010) discusses the living quality and necessity of authentic wampum; neither message nor wampum

could stand alone and be considered alive. William Commanda-bun's vision of all nations and races coming together was forward thinking and because of this he was accepted both nationally and internationally by others.

My vision of changing the social world through a change in modes of thinking and consciousness is with the Berry Fast and its applicability in contemporary society. I believe there is a place this can occur and would like to ensure that this rite of passage is not seen as archaic, but still practical for young Indigenous women and girls. This may be a shift in thinking for some who view it is an historic puberty rite that should remain as such. There is the possibility of the connecting of the Berry Fast, its intent, and apply it in modern society.

5. Places emphasis on radical change, emancipation, and potentiality.

The adopting of non-Indigenous ways of living by an Indigenous person may look successful, but to return to our original ontology is true success. Indigenous ontology is "the reverential connections between the spiritual realms of operations of the universe and the material operating platform or the physical earth, of the treasured Mother; acting in accord beyond peaceful existence" (Foley, 2003, pp. 47). Upon the return of this way of thought, only then can true traditional and cultural resurgence of Indigenous people occur.

In summary, to rationalize my use of the term Indigenist, I would like to state that I am an Indigenous person who researches Indigenous topics with Indigenous peoples. I pull from the knowledge and wisdom provided to me by my Algonquin Indigenous family as I take in, process, and form opinions and perspectives. I use the tools taught to me by and with Indigenous Elders, older family members, and Indigenous scholars as I continue to form my opinions and perspectives. This is also shaped by the morals and values I have learned in life and also affects the way I walk through life. I am also able to employ these learned ways of being through my

research as I begin to understand the importance of Indigenous voices within academia as it adds to the overall immense body of knowledge. By this definition, I am an Algonquin Indigenist researcher and that is the paradigm that I follow.

As I experience, view, and live my life through my paradigm, I have situated myself and am content with using this lens, but I also understand and am able to appreciate other lenses with respect. As I use my lens, I am able to discuss my theoretical framework next.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The spark which ignited my interest in pursuing the type of theoretical framework I will be discussing came from a conversation in the fall of 2012 as I was preparing for my comprehensive exam. As part of the exam process, I asked Dr. Taima Moeke-Pickering, the director of the School of Indigenous Relations program at Laurentian University if she would be part of my comprehensive exam committee which she agreed to. Throughout one of the conversations we had, we were discussing the sweetgrass story weaving methodology I was proposing to employ which led us to discussing theory. Throughout my initial coursework, I was focused on utilizing grounded theory as my theoretical framework and after much thought I decided I would employ a theory for Indigenous focused research, which at the time was in its formation. Through our discussion and my explanation of my evolving research methodology, Dr. Moeke-Pickering mentioned that what I was using was grounded theory but not in the Western perspective; the grounded theory she was thinking about was from an Indigenous perspective, more of grassroots grounded theory.

I thought about this at the time and naively thought my sweetgrass story weaving methodology was all I required for a theoretical framework. After experiencing the action of utilizing my Indigenous research methodology, sweetgrass story weaving within a holistic

Indigenous perspective, I then understood what Dr. Moeke-Pickering had shared with me. I was able to situate myself through my Algonquin Indigenist lens as I utilized the grassroots grounded theory which included at a deeper level: my sweetgrass storyweaving method of collecting, analyzing, and showcasing the stories which the traditional Indigenous women shared. Keeping the original thought creator of this theory, Taima Moeke-Pickering, I would like to further explore it as Indigenous Grassroots Theory.

### **Indigenous Grassroots Theory.**

Indigenous Grassroots Theory begins with Indigenous peoples being heard and validated as authentic thought and decision-makers and in charge of their own destiny at the community, family, and individual level. Indigenous Grassroots Theory may look very similar to grounded theory in its many forms and variations. According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory is the process of developing a theory, not testing a theory. “In a grounded theory study, the researcher generates an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, a theory that explains some action, interaction or process which is grounded in the views from participants in the field” (pp. 239). The difference between them is Indigenous Grassroots Theory goes below the ground, it digs deep into the Body, Mind, and Spirit of Indigenous peoples and allows their voices to be heard, individually or collectively. Instead of delving into the differences between the two theories, I would like to focus on not only how Indigenous Grassroots Theory [IGT] works but also the amount of cultural reflexivity needed to employ the concept of digging deep, succinctly.

IGT always begins with the voices of the participants directly affected by the social phenomena, although from a reflexive perspective it may include the researcher if they are also

directly affected or also secondarily affected by collecting, analyzing, and showcasing the data collected together with the participants.

1. Importance of participants' voices being at the forefront of the data collected; other data may be collected to strengthen the participants' voices, but care should be taken to ensure it does not overpower them eg. journal articles, books, et cetera.

The voice of the people should come first as it is the most important. It is from the people and their lived experiences, thoughts, desires, and expressions that are seen as integral and literature should follow it and not the other way around. This legitimizes the importance of the words spoken and should be honoured and treated with great respect.

2. Historical information regarding Indigenous peoples should always be included as a method of explaining the multi-layered stages they find themselves in eg. colonization, assimilation strategies

The inclusion of historical information allows the person receiving the information to place their views and perspectives within the lens of colonization and oppression. It is this prequel that may be missing from discourse in the general public, or also may be known by so many that it becomes part of their thinking, not keeping into consideration newcomers to the everyday discourse about Indigenous peoples.

3. Avoidance of Indigenous homogeneity; what one community, nation, tribe's voices share does not necessarily mean the same for all Indigenous peoples although there may be common themes

It requires constant determination and critical thinking to be able to not homogenize Indigenous peoples' culture, traditions, and beliefs. This type of thinking avoids the blanket perspectives and thoughts involved in Indigenous conversations and writing. This allows separate nations to feel the autonomy and not consolidation.



4. Cultural reflexivity is key

The ability to reflect on how thoughts, perspectives, beliefs find their way into our minds, conversation, beliefs, and perspectives is key, along with the ability to change directions in thinking. This is about humble growth as a person honouring Indigenous voices with respect.

5. Importance of Indigenous research completed by culturally informed Indigenous peoples when researching Indigenous traditional areas

This is about respect for the topic researched, and it is not to dissuade those who are not culturally informed from completing research with Indigenous peoples. This is where it is important to have helpers, and possibly advisory circle members to assist in the production of respectful research completed with Indigenous peoples.

6. Employment of a culturally relevant data collection, coding, analysis, and presentation of data directly with the grassroots level participants

Culturally relevant research work within Indigenous communities and individuals should be shared with grassroots level participants as an imperative part of this theory as it shows transparency and honesty in all of the work completed. This enriches the work completed, along with enriching the relationships with Indigenous peoples along the way.

As I worked with Indigenous women throughout this research, I followed my Indigenous Grassroots Theory. I wanted to ensure their Indigenous women's voices were at the forefront of while including the historical nature of rites of passage and Indigenous women themselves. This was done to honour their words and also provide an understanding of the history of Indigenous women in Canada. My passion is with the traditional rite of passage which is the Berry Fast, and although there are many other rites of passages that Indigenous women across Canada and the

world partake in; I chose the one which Ojibwe and Algonquin women in the Sudbury, Ontario, Canada participate in. In doing so, I avoid homogenizing rites of passage for all Indigenous women.

I have continuously read and reread the stories the women shared, sat with Elder Mary Elliott, participated in ceremonies myself, and met with my thesis supervisor to ensure I am on the right path. This is part of my cultural reflexivity which is an important part of the theory as it dictates the flow of the work being completed and also the health of it. I have also ensured that the women were able to view their stories before beginning data analysis to ensure they were correct. Although this sounds much like part of a research methodology, it is the thought of ensuring the women were able to see their stories first which I would like to highlight as it shows reverence for their words and participation.

The overview of this thesis is completed through the act of sweetgrass picking with each chapter progressing through the experience. This is part of the culturally relevant way I choose to portray and work with the Indigenous women who participated, including research assistance and Elders. As the reader, you will see the methodology used within this thesis as avenue of culturally relevant data collection, analysis and presentation. It is the use of this research methodology that comes from my belief in Indigenous Grassroots Theory.

Within Chapter One, I shared information regarding Indigenous women and girls from a historical and contemporary perspective, discussed the importance of rite of passages with a focus on the Berry Fast, shared my epistemological and ontological perspective as a traditional Indigenous woman, and introduced my theoretical framework. I have surveyed the sweetgrass through the literature review, located myself holistically, and explained my Indigenist Grassroots Theory through my Algonquin Indigenist paradigm.

In summary, I plant my feet firmly in my Algonquin Indigenist paradigm whilst generating an Indigenous Grassroots Theory with focus on employing my methodology: sweetgrass story weaving which will be further discussed and expanded on in Chapter Two: Harvesting Sweetgrass.

## **Chapter Two: Harvesting Sweetgrass**

### **Methodology, Shifting into a New Research Paradigm**

Within this chapter, I will discuss the journey I shared with other Indigenous women throughout the research process using the concept of ethical space. The research process and journey is indicative of an ever-growing body of traditional Indigenous women's knowledge in the area of their moontime. As an Indigenous woman and researcher, myself, I felt a connection to these women through gender, shared histories, and similar life experiences. The connection felt by this writer through the research journey will also be grounded within current research standards, then further introduced through an Indigenous research methodology: sweetgrass story weaving, cultural reflexivity, and the importance of holism in Indigenous storytelling.

**Ethical space.** In keeping with the concept of ethical space I will explain how I am utilizing this space to ensure my research is completed with Indigenous women in a good way. "The ethical space is a concept, a process that unfolds, that is inclusive of a series of stages from dialogue to dissemination of results, each played out in many different codes and relationships at the level of research practice" (Ermine et al., 2004, pp. 21). In order to explain the negotiation of a safe and ethical space to conduct research, I will explain my research journey through:

1. Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, Chapter 9, Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada
2. Use of an Indigenous research methodology: sweetgrass story weaving which highlights:
  - a. Cultural reflexivity
  - b. Importance of holism in Indigenous storytelling.

Ermine et al. (2004) examines the space between the Indigenous and Western worlds, the separation in the middle of cultures and worldviews, as the rift of understanding that contributes to the occasionally strained endeavour of cross cultural research involving Indigenous peoples.

Ermine et al. (2004) inform us of the intent to reconnect the entities with the notion of a bridging concept called the ethical space.

He further shares that the shift to new paradigms of research is the result of the decolonization agenda that has as a principal goal: the amelioration of disease and the recovery of health and wellness for Indigenous populations. Internationally, Indigenous communities are reminding and openly challenging the research community to be cautious of research practices based on exploitation, racism, ethnocentricity, and harmfulness which destabilize Indigenous peoples' empowerment and self-dependence (Ermine et al., 2004). Wilde (2004) agrees that Aboriginal people are no longer willing to be subjects of research that is unethical and harmful to Aboriginal communities. This type of research jeopardizes the integrity of work and the access to individuals who have much to teach us.

Although I am an Indigenous researcher, I believe it is still imperative I work from an ethical space. The ethical space which Ermine et al. (2004) discuss is between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, I believe I can also benefit from sharing this space. I have been raised and research trained within a western mainstream educational system with which I have absorbed mainstream ways of thinking within the area of research. I am also an Indigenous woman who is active in the upkeep of my Algonquin traditions through ceremonies, traditions, and gatherings. All within this ethical space is where I employ sweetgrass story-weaving to highlight the Indigenous women's stories utilizing cultural reflexivity, and the importance of holism in Indigenous storytelling.

### **Research assistance.**

As I completed my research, the ethical space I shared with traditional Indigenous women who were interviewed also included Lisa Osawamick, an Indigenous woman who assisted with this research.

Lisa Osawamick was born on the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Canada. She is part of a large family of strong Indigenous women and men who role model and epitomize *mino-bimaadiziwin*. Lisa's current employment position is Aboriginal Women Violence Prevention Coordinator at the City of Greater Sudbury through a shared partnership with the Greater Sudbury Police and the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. She has worked and volunteered in the Sudbury area in various helping capacities for over ten years. She is a hand drummer, attends traditional ceremonies on a regular basis, and is connected at the grassroots level with Indigenous women from all walks of life.

She and her Osawamick family members can be found on the pow wow trail in the summer months offering food at their popular booth, and selling Indigenous made crafts and jewellery at another well-established booth which her family owns. Through this connection and amount of travelling she has done with her family, she has met and connected with many diverse nations, communities, and Indigenous peoples. Her connection in the Indigenous community is one of respect, humour, and kindness. She understands the importance of this Berry Fast having completed it herself along with other family members. She also recognizes the strength and resilience of traditional Indigenous women, and the sharing of knowledge to benefit themselves. This is also why she was integral to the success of collecting stories with the traditional

Indigenous women who chose to participate. These are the reasons why Lisa Osawamick decided to assist with this research and share in the research journey.

As part of community engagement, I enlisted her assistance with data collection and returning the written stories to the women as part of the member checking process. Lisa also assisted with the community feast which was held after the data analysis was complete to present to the traditional Indigenous women who participated in the research.

I recognized that within the role I currently have with the Indigenous community, I would have been unable to reach the members Lisa was able to recruit for the project. Due to the busyness of raising a family, working, and attending school part-time, I was unable to stay as active within the Indigenous community as I would have liked. When I initially asked Lisa Osawamick to assist with data collection, I informed her of the research itself, but also the importance of confidentiality which she agreed to and understood. I provided her with tobacco to signal the agreement and partnership in data collection. I provided Lisa with the questions she was to ask the women she interviewed, and remained at arm's length from the women she interviewed. She was able to recruit seven Indigenous women through the use of a poster I created (See Appendix 4, Recruitment flyer for research participants) and also word of mouth with her community connections.

After recruiting, Lisa interviewed the women, and returned to meet with them to share their finished stories as part of the member checking process. She then shared with me the areas which the women wanted to change or to approve the story version. Since Lisa Osawamick completed seven of the interviews, I was not privy to who they were which adds security in their privacy. The women who were interviewed by me were also provided with the same opportunities in the area of privacy and confidentiality. Furthermore, when the invitation for the

community feast went out for the traditional Indigenous women who participated in the research, they were informed it would be a group setting with other women.

Sharing the journey with Indigenous peoples is the most important part of such research or community development process (Hodge & Lester, 2006). However, Hodge & Lester (2006) contend that emerging Indigenous researchers must be prepared to wait to be invited into the domain. As a member of the community of Sudbury for over fifteen years, I am part of the Indigenous community where I gathered stories from the women. I also worked within the Indigenous community as a social worker for over ten years which has helped me strengthen my relationship with the community.

Hodge & Lester (2006) believe in the inclusion of an Indigenous conceptual method of explanation - an Indigenous 'way of seeing'. Rice (2005) discusses *Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes* by becoming immersed in a particular Aboriginal worldview, being wholly integrated into a way of life, ceremonies, language and culture. I view the world from within my Algonquin Indigenous lens; I filter my life through this lens, my interactions, thoughts, actions, and speech. I am very familiar and practice Algonquin traditions and ceremonies while trying to live holistically by the seven Grandfather/Grandmother teachings in a good way. There is an in-group language and culture in which I am able to participate also, along with the more formal Indigenous ceremonial ones.

Indigenous cultures possess ways of viewing the world that are unique from mainstream culture; part of this view involves comprehending intangible aspects of the universe which are sources of power that reside in humankind and animate beings that surround humankind. Ermine et al. (2004) discusses emerging paradigms that utilize Indigenous knowledge and worldview for the development of the ethical foundations of research which can help usher in a new research



relationship that is modeled on emancipation and a human vision of transformation. An emerging paradigm used for this research is in the form of sweetgrass story weaving which will be explained following the application of research standards.

**Research standards.** In order to ensure the research was completed ethically, I first turn to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) as part of the research journey which takes place within Ermine et al.'s (2004) ethical space.

In August 2010, in accordance with its mandate, the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (the Panel) submitted its final version of the 2nd edition of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), or “the Agencies,” and recommended the Policy’s adoption. (Panel on Research Ethics, 2014, para 1). It expresses the three agencies’ commitment to the people of Canada to promote the ethical conduct of research involving humans (CIHR, NSERC & SSHRC, 2010). The Agencies approved this 2nd edition of the TCPS, which incorporates the changes they deemed appropriate.

As part of these changes, the three Agencies mentioned above added a new chapter specifically written with Indigenous peoples: Chapter 9, Research Involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada (Panel on Research Ethics, 2010, pp. 2). This chapter establishes a step toward establishing an ethical space for dialogue on common interests and points of difference between researchers and Aboriginal communities engaged in research (Panel on Research Ethics, 2015, para. 1).

The relevant Articles (Panel on Research Ethics, 2015) that will be discussed are specific to the research which was completed with the traditional Indigenous women:

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Article 9.1  | Engagement with the relevant community (para. 35).                             |
| Article 9.2  | Joint discussion on community engagement (para. 42).                           |
| Article 9.8  | Knowledge of community customs and codes of research practice (para. 82).      |
| Article 9.10 | Process of engaging the relevant community (para. 100).                        |
| Article 9.12 | Appropriate, collaborative and participatory approach (para. 115).             |
| Article 9.13 | Relevant and beneficial research to community needs and priorities (para.121). |
| Article 9.15 | Identify Elders or other recognized knowledge holders (para. 131).             |
| Article 9.16 | Address privacy and confidentiality (para. 135).                               |
| Article 9.18 | Discussion of intellectual property rights (para. 146) .                       |

Within Article 9.1, there is a requirement of community engagement in Aboriginal research when the research is likely to affect the welfare of an Aboriginal community, or communities, to which prospective participants belong. The researchers shall seek engagement with the relevant community with conditions that include, but are not limited to: research that seeks input from participants regarding a community's cultural heritage, artefacts, traditional knowledge or unique characteristics, and interpretation of research results that will refer to Aboriginal communities, peoples, language, history or culture (para. 35). Moreover, Article 9.2 is about the nature and extent of community engagement in a project which shall be determined jointly by the researcher and the relevant community, and shall be appropriate to community characteristics and the nature of the research (para. 42).

As I completed the research with Indigenous women, I realized the importance of community engagement within Sudbury, Ontario where it was completed. Although this is an urban area and no band council resolutions were required, I still felt the need to ensure the community was involved due to the fact that I sought input from participants regarding their cultural knowledge, including the interpretation.

Within Article 9.8, which deals with respect for community customs and codes of practice, it states that researchers have an obligation to become informed about, and to respect, the relevant customs and codes of research practice that apply in the particular community or communities affected by their research. Inconsistencies between community custom and this Policy should be identified and addressed in advance of initiating the research, or as they arise (para. 82).

The research relationships with each woman was conducted using the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession [OCAP] principles resulting in positive working relationships. The principles of OCAP enable self determination over all research concerning First Nations (First Nations Centre, 2007). “Research must respect the privacy, protocols, dignity and individual and collective rights of First Nations. It must also derive from First Nations’ values, culture and traditional knowledge” (First Nations Centre, 2005, pp. 13). The First Nations Centre (2005) writes that in trying to put these principles into action, it is important to recall that at the heart of OCAP is self-determination, including recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over research in their communities (pp. 23).

Under the principle of ownership, the traditional women own the data which they provided for this dissertation. The words which were said within the interviews, transcribed, coded, analyzed and interpreted belong to the women and not to me. Within the consent form they signed they understand the purpose, expectations, benefits, and risks of participating in the research.

Within the control principle, the women who shared their stories maintain control over their content and how it is used within my thesis. An example is when the transcripts were turned into story format and provided back to the women for feedback there were a few additions

to one story which was added, given back to her for to review and was subsequently approved. Also, one woman decided to pull her information out after it was turned into a story. She mentioned she was not happy with what she said and wanted to drop out. This particular woman's story and transcript was not used, and immediately taken out of the data to be analyzed. In the future, if the women or myself want to turn the stories into a publication, I will request permission from each woman as their individual stories belong to them, first and foremost.

Under the principle of access, the traditional Indigenous women have been provided a copy of their transcripts and their completed story. As part of engagement, the women also have access to the finished story of all their individual stories combined within this thesis which will be emailed to them as a portable document folder [PDF] upon completion.

The principle of possession may be seen as complex since the information collected will be used within a publication for the requirements of a degree. The individual possession of the data they shared will remain theirs; the analysis and representation of the collective story is what will be used for the requirements of my degree. The traditional Indigenous women also have had the opportunity to hear the collective story and add feedback before submitting the dissertation to fulfill the requirements for this degree.

There is a requirement to advise the Research Ethics Board on a plan for community engagement which is outlined in Article 9.10. When proposing research expected to involve First Nations, Inuit or Métis participants, researchers shall advise their REB how they have engaged, or intend to engage, the relevant community (para. 100). Within my original ethics application, I was proposing to engage four reserves within Quebec. After two revisions, it was approved. I attempted to engage the communities which was unsuccessful. I did engage one reserve, met with the chief and councillors and signed a research agreement with them, but was unsuccessful

with the other three bands. After discussing this with my thesis supervisor, she suggested that I look at off reserve traditional Indigenous women. When I changed the location, it was easier to start the recruitment process for data collection since I did not have to sign community research agreements with urban and off reserve Indigenous women.

I learned from this process that what I write down and propose to research with Indigenous peoples is not necessarily what is important for them. Looking back, if I were to approach the reserves prior to completing my research proposal, and ethics application I would have known that my area of research was not priority for them which would have saved time for myself as a researcher. It is important for the community to request or see the need within their own community and partner with researchers. I can see now that the way I should have proceeded was to meet with the reserves prior to completing a research proposal, build a stronger relationship, get to know the communities on a more intimate level and then see what they are interested in and/or what their needs are. Although, I believe that my area of research is needed, it may not be the same for these communities and I respect that. Furthermore, since I did not form relationships within the communities prior, I do not know if women within each of these communities would have supported my research or not. This was an important lesson in building and developing rapport with community members for the sake of relationship building and understanding what is needed within the community and not solely depending on the band council.

Article 9.12 discusses the importance of collaborative research which, as part of the community engagement process, researchers and communities should consider applying (para. 115). Collaborative research with a participatory approach was appropriate within this research since it was grassroots community based. I interviewed traditional Indigenous women who were

not connected with an agency, they answered the call for stories which were promoted within the city of Sudbury. No agencies were involved within this research, but I did collaborate with the grassroots community.

Within the research conducted, there were mutual benefits within the community engagement that took place. Article 9.13 entails the importance of strengthening research capacity, ensuring the research is relevant to community needs and priorities, benefits the participating community and extends the boundaries of knowledge (para. 121). As part of the research process, I returned to present the results from the stories they shared to ensure it represents them properly. The women all used pseudonyms or their traditional Indigenous spirit names and will be recognized within my dissertation as contributors, along with the local Indigenous woman who assisted with the research. Furthermore, I revised their transcripts into stories and returned them to the women as a sign of gratitude for their participation.

Article 9.15 discusses the importance of recognizing the role of Elders and other knowledge holders. Researchers should engage the community in identifying Elders or other recognized knowledge holders to participate in the design and execution of research, and the interpretation of findings in the context of cultural norms and traditional knowledge. Community advice should also be sought to determine appropriate recognition for the unique advisory role fulfilled by these persons (para. 131). To ensure the research process encompassed culturally informed approaches, I was fortunate to collaborate with a traditional Indigenous woman as part of my dissertation committee in an advisory capacity: Cheryle Partridge.

Privacy and confidentiality is addressed in Article 9.16 where researchers and community partners shall address privacy and confidentiality for communities and individuals early on in the community engagement process (para. 135). Within the research which was conducted, there

were no formal community partners, but when data collection was commencing a consent form was shared with them. The consent form explained the risks, benefits, and purpose of the research which was signed by the women who participated. A pseudonym was chosen before any information was recorded via interviews where many of the women chose their spirit names as the name used within the research.

All of the signed consent forms are in a locked filing cabinet in my home office, and their transcripts, interviews are on a password protected USB key. As part of their consent form which each traditional Indigenous woman read, reviewed, and signed; they were aware that their participation was voluntary and they were able to remove themselves from this particular study at any time for any reason.

Article 9.18 discusses intellectual property when completed within collaborative research. It states that intellectual property rights should be discussed by researchers, communities and institutions (para. 146). Although within the consent form which was signed by each women state that participants' stories and the methods used to collect them will be reported in academic publications, it is important to honour their stories and respect the information provided by them.

As you have read, I have addressed the important areas of my research within Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement [TCPS2]: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans: Research Involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada. Although I have fulfilled the requirements from a mainstream perspective, I would also like to fulfill the requirements from an Indigenous community based perspective. The requirements for working with Indigenous communities may extend well beyond what is in the TCPS2; it is about relationships,

development of rapport, and continuity which encompasses the present and future community relationships.

**Sweetgrass story weaving.** Within this section I will introduce my research methodology: sweetgrass story weaving which highlights the importance of holism in Indigenous storytelling, and cultural reflexivity. There have been shifts in the way non-Indigenous researchers and academics have positioned themselves and their work in relation to the people for whom the research counts (Smith, 1999). Moeke-Pickering (2010) affirms that through the literature she reviewed on Indigenous methodologies, “emphasis on the contexts of Indigenous peoples, privileging their stories, honouring their cultural values, respecting their ways of being seem to be key threads coming through the literature” (pp. 89). The sweetgrass story weaving methodology comprises of the collection of stories weaving the Body, Mind and Spirit together to recreate a holistic framework. All elements of a sweet grass braid are symbolic and have significance. The braid is said to be the hair of Mother Earth and the three sections of the braid represent Mind, Body and Spirit. The sweetgrass, once braided, is stronger than any one strand on its own, which symbolizes community and unity (Lesyk, 2011, para. 10).

The Body section of the braid involves physical actions and reactions which may be acted out by the person involved in the story, they may be the recipient of a physical action so their physical reactions can also be observed. Physical reactions fit well within the Body section of the braid because the reaction to it is important as it adds to the richness of the story. The collective story may include positive actions and reaction such as physical connections through touching, massaging, holding hands and the like; reactions could be the warmth felt within their body, their smiles, laughter, and being physically relaxed. In contrast, there may be negative



actions and reactions which are shared such as unwanted or unintentional physical force such as abuse or a car accident; the physical reactions to this may be crying, screaming, pain, etc.

The Mind section of the braid involves mental actions and reactions similar to the Body section. These mental actions or reactions may be experienced by the person involved in the story, or they may be the recipient of a mental action so it is important to highlight the reactions to it for the collective story. The uniqueness of this section of the braid is that it happens within the mind so it is a lone action which means the action and reaction occur on their own. It is the act of sharing their mental actions and reactions which allow us a look into how their thoughts work. The collective story also may include positive mental actions such as resilience, positive self-esteem, and problem solving which in turn will positively affect their reaction to their positive mental actions. On the other hand, those who actively have negative mental actions such as lower self-esteem, poor coping skills, and a negative self-image may find themselves in a self-fulfilling prophetic mindset.

The Spirit section of the braid includes spiritual actions and reactions which may be experienced by the person involved in the story or they may be on the receiving end of the action so their spiritual reactions are what should be highlighted. As the collective story is woven, the spiritual actions and reactions may include praying, being on the land and with nature, or participating in their respective cultural traditions and ceremonies; the spiritual reaction to these actions may include fulfilment, a sense of peace, and connection. Alternatively, there may be a negative spiritual action or reaction to a spiritual action which could include using spirituality haphazardly with disregard for proper training which may hurt others as it is not used in a good way.

Although the three sections, Body, Mind and Spirit were explained singularly they would not be able to exist without each other from a holistic Indigenous perspective. The body reacts to an action or event, which is processed in the mind, and in order to situate how they are feeling both physically or mentally and emotionally the spiritual aspect would appear. Mawhiney and Nabigon (2011) discuss spirituality as not being separate from everyday life and there is no sense of object and subject; all is one: “Mind, body, emotions, and spirit are not separate from the earth and everything on it; it is all interrelated” (pp. 17). Furthermore, according to Chartrand (2012), there is a responsibility to nurture all aspects of our being together as one, not as separate entities.

**Indigenous storytelling.** McKeough et al. (2008) state that oral narrative or storytelling fits with Aboriginal epistemology-the nature of their knowledge, its foundations, scope, and validity. Chartrand (2012) shares that the power of story is placing learners at the critical centre of their own being and life-worlds, and also a practice she sees at the heart of Anishinaabe pedagogy. Ermine et al. (2004) share it is Indigenous peoples’ right and duty to develop their own cultures and knowledge systems. This corroborates the use of storytelling as an integral part of an Indigenous research methodology. Furthermore, Eigenbrod and Hulan (2008) posit that oral traditions are distinct ways of knowing and the means by which knowledge is reproduced and conveyed from generation to generation.

There is power within storytelling which was observed through the sharing of stories as the women looked back on their first moontime, thinking about what they would have wanted to do, and also what they would like for future generations. The questions elicited a timeline of events which allowed the women to tell their story starting in the past, moving to the present, and then looking to the future. This is an intrinsic part of reflexive practices which is often explored

in terms of social positioning which asks how the social location of the researcher and the researched influence the investigation process and outcomes (Buckner, 2005). From my perspective, looking first allows us time to gather information (not research data) for the purpose of processing body language, and other non-verbal communication. Listening allows us to connect with another one of our senses for a more comprehensive assessment of our surroundings. Only when we have done this, can speaking be powerful.

The manner in which sweetgrass story weaving was utilized fits within an Indigenous epistemology as talking and sharing stories is how knowledge is transferred both historically and within a contemporary Indigenous setting. Rybak (2013) uses the term coherence which may be viewed as the weaving together of separate elements. Coherence identifies a state in which one brings together holistically the differing physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual systems to address life circumstances in a way that is appropriate to the situation (pp. 112).

In conclusion, storytelling is a traditional and cultural process within many Indigenous communities that assists in the transfer of knowledge. Anderson (2011) shares that she “weaves stories through oral communication, books, and articles with the hope that she can offer a rich multi layered story” (pp. 15). As the traditional Indigenous women share their stories of their first moontime and what they wish for future generations, this is a way to connect to the past, present and future through a culturally appropriate process.

With storytelling comes the essential process of reflexivity as I listen, process, analyze, and retell the women’s stories. Reflexivity in research is imperative; Savin-Baden (2004) shares that reflexivity is about situating oneself in the research and to acknowledge others who are involved and what they bring to the collaborative relationship. It is also about disclosing your value-base to those who participate in research, while working with people, and doing research

that is collaborative and sharing perspectives in the process of doing research (Savin-Baden, 2004). In my opinion, self-reflexivity can be used to encourage respect for people which can be shown in ways that will be able to grow organically over time with a strong initial research base.

A respect for the people I researched with was apparent before beginning the process of data collection. I have been part of the Indigenous community for several years and although my schooling has preoccupied my time, I am known within the Indigenous community and have returned when able to. As I situate myself in the research from within an Algonquin Indigenist lens, I work with others in a collaborative manner ensuring they understand what the purpose of the research is and ensuring they are well-informed before choosing to participate.

I mentioned earlier that a researcher may require starting their relationship with Indigenous peoples before the commencement of any formal research. As an Aboriginal researcher, there is usually a long-standing history with potential participants based on genealogy, family and community connections and through reputation (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2006). I conclude that for a non-Indigenous researcher it may be difficult to make connections in the community that has taken others decades to foster and appreciate, however, the research cannot begin before the relationship-building.

This has been a research journey in which I have had the honour of working with other Indigenous women within the community, listening to their stories and being able to provide them with a collective story which reflects their Body, Mind, and Spiritual aspects. As I walk this journey with the Indigenous women who shared their stories, and also with Lisa who assisted with the interviews, I feel it was completed in a good way. Although I was not physically present during seven of the ten interviews, I did organize a community feast where there was the opportunity for us to see each other, discuss the results, and share

recommendations. The importance of a strong initial research base does help with the overall journey since it has evolved into an ethical space where thoughts and emotions were shared in a respectful way.

### **Data Collection.**

**Step 1-recruit women to tell their stories.** There were ten traditional Indigenous women who were recruited within an urban setting. The female participants were self-identified traditional Indigenous women over the ages of 18 with no exclusionary criteria. The participants were recruited through flyers within Laurentian University, and non-profit social service agencies with permission from the executive directors to post within their agencies. I initially wanted to utilize snowball sampling with recruited participants to enlist other Indigenous women as potential participants. The three women that I interviewed provided names of other women whom they thought might be interested in participating. After I contacted them, there was not much interest in participating from them. As part of a culturally reflexive practice, I understood that the women were not interested and I did not continue to ask them. I provided my contact information to them and let them know they were able to share their story if they were interested.

This is an intrinsic part of reflexive practices which is often explored in terms of social positioning which asks how the social location of the researcher and the researched influence the investigation process and outcomes (Buckner, 2005). From my perspective, looking first allows us time to gather information (not research data) for the purpose of processing body language, and other non-verbal communication. Listening allows us to connect with another one of our senses for a more comprehensive assessment of our surroundings. Only when we have done this, can speaking be powerful.

**Step 2-collect the women's stories.** Through informal interviews at the participants' convenience they were able to share their stories. Gray, Oré de Boehm, Farnsworth, & Wolf (2010) share that traditions, such as storytelling and traditional crafts are examples of methods of connecting with the past and maintaining cultural congruity and positive group identity.

After the traditional Indigenous women showed interest in participating, Lisa set up a time to visit with them and reviewed the intent of the research with them. The women who were interested in proceeding were asked to sign a confidentiality form and Lisa provided a copy to them for their records. She then recorded the interviews with the traditional Indigenous women, asking only the research questions which were provided by me. Lisa then met with me to provide me with the confidentiality forms and completed audio interviews. She was compensated for the time she spent completing interviews through monetary means, somewhat reluctantly as she shared that she enjoyed spending time with the women and gathering their stories. The interviews were recorded and further transcribed using the following questions as a framework:

1. Tell me about yourself
2. What are things you remember from your first moontime?
3. Did you do something special? If not, what would you have wanted to do?
4. What would you like to see for girls in your community for their first moontime?

While revising the transcripts into a story form for the Indigenous women, the ones I completed had a lot of extra information which may not have been needed to answer the interview questions, but it did add richness and history to the stories they shared about their first moontime, what they would have wanted to do (if they did not do anything), and also what they want for future generations. The historical information was not added to answer the questions below, but when provided a copy of their final stories, it was added for depth and to show the importance of the words they shared.

Understanding that the OCAP principles state data belongs to the researched, not researcher (First Nations Centre, 2007) is important to remember. In order to accept that data cannot be held is part of reflexivity which is a journey, not a destination.

As part of the revision process, I returned each women's individual story to ensure they were accurate. The data which was collected is shared with the understanding I borrow their words to assist with the research. It is a collaborative effort between myself and the women who participated in the research by sharing their story. Each woman was also provided with a copy of their final story in order to show my gratitude from their participation. As part of showing my gratitude I held a sharing circle and meal, as part of a larger community feast, in order to ensure their voices were heard. The Indigenous women who participated in this research have had the opportunity to hear the collective story and add their feedback. It is imperative that their voices are heard not only from data collection outcome, but also through clear representation since the original words come from the women.

### **Coding.**

**Step 3-braid all stories together by three categories.** The coding process involved three categories: Body, Mind and Spirit. Chartrand (2012) shares a teaching she learned from Myra Laramée on the medicine wheel which involved deconstructing a whole person by sectioning of four domains: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. All parts of stories related to the physical aspect were placed in the Body category, emotional and mental aspects placed in the Mind category, and all spiritual aspects will in the Spirit category. Further subcategories underneath these three broad categories were necessary to ensure the stories were honoured in a respectful manner.

At the early point of coding, I assigned each woman a number along with the names they chose as their pseudonyms:

- 01 Rose Woman
- 02 Butterfly Rock Woman
- 03 The One That Flys Above
- 04 Lightning Woman
- 05 Whitecloud Woman
- 06 Lokoduq
- 07 Charlie
- 08 Bidaasa Kwe
- 09 Elizabeth

As you can see, there were ten women interviewed and only nine stories. One of the traditional Indigenous women was provided a copy of her finished story and after reading it decided she did not want to be part of the research. Instead of adding her here and removing her name after, I wanted to respect her wishes of not being involved and removed her name.

As I continued coding I concentrated on the last three questions as the first one was used not to assist with the results section, but used as an introduction for their final, individualized stories. I numbered and titled each question:

001 Looking Back, Past: What are things you remember from your first moontime?

002 In the Present: Did you do something special for your first moontime? If not, what would you have wanted to do?

003 Looking Ahead, Future: What would you like to see for girls in your community for their first moontime?

In the each of the three coding sections, I added the B for Body, M for Mind, and S for Spirit:

001 Looking Back, Past

B001-Any answers related to the physical aspect

M001-Any answers related to the emotional and mental aspect

S001-Any answers related to the spiritual aspect



002 In the Present

B002-Any answers related to the physical aspect

M002-Any answers related to the emotional and mental aspect

S002-Any answers related to the spiritual aspect

003 Looking Ahead, Future

B003-Any answers related to the physical aspect

M003-Any answers related to the emotional and mental aspect

S003-Any answers related to the spiritual aspect

As I began coding it became clearer as to where I would place data from each traditional Indigenous women's story. As I initially began to read each transcript I harvested relevant sections and added them to the section which made the most sense. If a woman was talking about the past and how her body felt, I would add that section of her story to the corresponding area which fit the description. If another participant talked about what she wanted for future generations and described the importance of the Creator, I added that section of her story to the Future area underneath the spiritual aspect. I went through each story and pulled out the relevant data and placed them within the sections and subsections listed above (Appendix 5, Coding Results).

After harvesting and separating the data into each section and subsection, I then read each section with similarities and began to form themes. The themes came from areas which were repeated, and also through my perspective as an Indigenous researcher using reflexivity. The concept of reflexivity is often explored in terms of social positioning which asks how the social location of the researcher and the researched influence the investigation process and outcomes (Buckner, 2005). Jootun, McGhee & Marland (2009) note that reflexivity assists in making the process open and transparent and by incorporating their social selves it will allow them to engage with participants and enrich the quality of the research.

Reflexivity was initially employed to separate the researcher from the research process, but has evolved as a process used to demonstrate the researcher's influence on the research process (Jootun, McGhee & Marland, 2009). Savin-Baden (2004) shares that reflexivity:

...is about situating my/self in the research and the processes of research in ways that acknowledge and do justice to my personal stance and to the personal stances of those involved in the research. It is also about disclosing my value-base to those who participate in research. It is about working with people, doing research that is collaborative and sharing perspectives in the process of doing research (pp. 366).

The ongoing challenge of reflexive practices is being the kind of researcher who really negotiates description and interpretation of data with participants, and who reflects upon the experience of the research process for those involved (Savin-Baden 2004; Nicolls, 2009). "The challenges that emerge from managing ... complex perspectives seem to be among the components that push researchers away from coded categories and encourage them to engage with the relationship between themselves and their stories, and those of the participants" (Savin-Baden, 2004, pp. 369).

This part of the analysis required reading the results of each section repeatedly until I could see themes grouping. I attempted to place myself within the story and see it from their perspective and also my own as an Indigenous woman and researcher. It was at this point I decided to add my story to the beginning of each section and answer the same questions I posed to the women who participated. It allowed me to see the data from a participant and also the researcher's perspective. This was an intimate way of viewing, coding, and analyzing data which I experienced as I formed themes within each section. As the user of an Indigenous research methodology, there is legitimacy in the idea of feeling the data in a holistic manner: bodily as I physically see it, through the mind aspect as I emotionally and mentally experience it, and spiritually as I ensure it is completed in a good way.

I physically needed to feel the data which I printed out on paper, and held as I read it over and over. I also included the mental and emotional analysis also as I used my research expertise to harvest themes which fits in with my sweetgrass story weaving methodology. I was able to see the themes forming as I read and read the sections. I used my emotion as I formed the themes which may be seen as not separating myself from the data, but I believe it assisted with the themes being more authentic. This may be seen as being too close to the research, but I worked on the balance between being too close to the data and maintaining a boundary through member checking which I will discuss in the next step of my methodology.

As the themes from each subsection began to develop, I became a bit overwhelmed with the various themes so I placed them on a wheel (Appendix 7, Results Wheel).

Mussell, Nicholls, & Adler (1993) define the medicine wheel as a popular symbol for helping Indigenous people articulate a definition of health. I used the framework of a medicine wheel to display my emerging results which was easier to manage. I placed the Past section, subsection and themes into the East which signifies Vision, the ability to See and be aware. The past section in the East can translate into having vision to look into the past, see it, and be aware of their first moontime and the holistic impact it has had on them. The South aspect had the Present section and themes which signify Time and how to relate and understand it from the present moment. This section can transfer into how the traditional Indigenous women were able to view time as in the past when looking back at their first moontime which impacts them today, and also the ability to look to the future. The traditional Indigenous women were able to relate the past, present, and future to where they are at today which can be construed as relatedness, which is an important part of the South aspect of the medicine wheel. The West section of the wheel is about Reason, and figuring out concepts and questions with the knowledge provided to

us from the Past and what we hold in the Present. This section translates into what the traditional Indigenous women learned from their life (past), and the knowledge they hold now (present), and how they will use it going forward (future).

**Step 4-arrange weaved stories into a circle to signify their strength.** At this point, the traditional Indigenous women's stories were sectioned off into different areas. It was now time to weave them back together as one strong story to promote community cohesion and ownership over the finished story. In the end after braiding each question back together, I initially thought there were going to be three different braids for each question. What actually happened was the questions were interrelated and connected through time (past, present, and future) so I was able to connect them to make one collective sweetgrass braid.

When a person is literally harvesting sweetgrass they are selecting what they would like to harvest, cutting it out of the ground, cleaning the strands before hanging them to dry, and braiding them when ready. This can be seen as reading through the traditional Indigenous women's stories and putting them into their sections. There were three sections (Past, Present, and Future) with three further subsections within each of them (Body, Mind, and Spirit) which resulted in nine bunches of sweetgrass. Analysis is part of the journey on the road to interpretation (Savin-Baden, 2004). I would close my eyes and visually see the nine bunches of sweetgrass story subsections waiting to be cleaned and braided as strands grouped into bunches. Each sub section was formed into themes through the process similar to preparing sweetgrass braids. I would take each subsection, separate into themes and regroup as stronger strands to braid together. For example, when I looked at the Present section, I took each subsection of Body, Mind, and Spirit and looked at them individually. As I looked at the Body section, I separated the areas into themes and regrouped it together to make a stronger strand. I then did

the same to the two other sections: Mind and Spirit. After forming themes from each subsection, I braided them back together to start the formation of a collective story. The end result is one braid, one collective story with Body, Mind and Spirit weaved throughout three distinct sections: past, present, and future.

**Step 5-ensure all women accept the final sweetgrass story.** The traditional Indigenous women who participated in the informal interviews were given the opportunity to ensure their collective story was accurate through a second meeting. Piquemal (2004) asserts that research by nature is fluid; a researcher may begin with one topic and finish with a radically different one. Therefore, the researcher should be continually consulting with the participants at various stages of the research to ensure their continued consent. Confirming consent implies the participants have had a chance to review the research process, to reflect on what they have said, and to suggest corrections (Piquemal, 20004).

Carlson (2010) refers to this as member checking which is when participants are given transcripts or units from the narratives they contributed during interview sessions and are asked to verify their accuracy. The copy of their personal story is a symbol of giving back something that has been shared. “Reciprocity is an Aboriginal value that was incorporated throughout the Indigenous research methodology. We as Aboriginal researchers should know the teaching of giving back when something has been taken” (Goudreau, 2006, pp. 131).

As part of the reciprocal research relationship I invited the traditional women who shared their stories to a feast and sharing circle at the local Friendship Centre in order to share the draft results with them and also to gain feedback from them. As part of this gathering, I invited the traditional Indigenous woman from my dissertation committee to do the opening and closing prayer to ensure the sharing circle goes well and is done in a good way. There were five women

who attended the feast and sharing circle which signifies collaborative research. Piquemal (2004) shares that true collaborative research is to acknowledge and represent different voices: “doing so is particularly important when the researcher’s cultural background is different from the participants” (pp. 206).

Although I am an Indigenous researcher myself, I am aware there are many distinct nations among the Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Within the separate Indigenous nations, there are differing cultural customs, traditions, and ceremonies which I respect. I originate from northern Quebec and am part of the Algonquin First Nation peoples. The traditional Indigenous women I worked with mostly originate from the Ojibwe nation, with the exception of one Yupik woman from the Alaska region. There are differences amongst each nation although for the Algonquin and Ojibwe nations there are many similarities with stories, language, and ceremonies.

The Yupik nation has different customs, language and traditions, although the Yupik woman who was interviewed states she strongly identifies with Ojibwe people and incorporates their culture, traditions, and ceremonies with her own. I want to highlight the resilience and authenticity of the stories the women shared through the shared lens of myself as an Indigenous woman and also through the women’s lenses since they know their words and intent more intrinsically than I ever could. The stories are part of themselves as Indigenous women and I want to ensure it is shown in a way which is acceptable for them. I do this through remaining in contact with them, either through myself or through Lisa Osawamick who interviewed many of the women, and ensuring they remain informed about the research itself and the results.

Humility within research is necessary for growth and development. The Ojibwe teaching of Humility is to know yourself as a sacred part of Creation (Benton-Banai, 1988). In my

opinion, to know you are part of a bigger whole has the capacity to humble many people. The practice of not flaunting knowledge can be transferrable to other areas of life which may have beneficial effects for the person and for those around them. Within a culture where emphasis is placed on non-monetary and collective wealth as a community, instead of individual monetary wealth, this practice makes sense and fits in well with the concept of community health and wellness. If the lens is of community and interconnectedness, then what one person does within the community would be felt by all. This is part of the understanding of humility also; knowing individual members are seen as a larger part of the community and nation.

No one individual is held in higher or lower esteem than the next one; they are seen through a shared lens where together the whole picture is the finished product, not solely one section. This is where the practice of not flaunting your knowledge is important; to do so may be seen as being out of step with the community and placing importance on yourself as an individual and not for the betterment of the community. Each person within the community has their own gifts which are equally as important as someone with a lot of knowledge. The idea is to fit your gifts and self within the community instead of standing out which does not help with community health and wellness; it is seen as being out of harmony with the rest of the people. Flaunting your knowledge may be seen as standing outside of the community which does not help with interconnectedness and collectivity, which is why it is important to be humble and work within the community and not as an outsider.

The research which was completed as part of the requirements for my degree can be seen as stepping outside of the community, but the way I choose to represent myself is more important. I am able to succeed within higher education not only because of my gift of intelligence, but also because of the support which is provided first within my family, and then

also within the larger community. The gift of understanding and support from my husband and children has allowed my gifts to grow and develop. The gift of acceptance and friendship from the Indigenous community in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada has also helped me find my niche with my research but also as an Indigenous woman with important roles and responsibilities.

Also, the Indigenous academic community of fellow researchers has allowed me to remember my roots and return to my community for strength and a dose of humility which is so important. My community in northern Quebec has also gifted me with the continued funds in my on-going educational path which has been long, but also has allowed me to grow and understand the path that I am on is mine and I need to walk it in order to be successful. My family, community, the Indigenous community (both academic and non-academic), and the research participants all have an interconnected relationship with myself being a smaller part of it. When I introduce myself with the community, I first state who I am: Algonquin First Nation from Quebec which has the ability to connect me to others on a different level, a more even level. If I were to introduce myself as a doctoral student completing my degree, then it may be viewed as flaunting my knowledge which I do not want. I want to connect with others, not disconnect; in order to maintain the connection, I introduce myself by my nation which is my authentic self.

From my perspective, these principles are connected to the ethical space through intent, implementation and connection between Indigenous researchers and other interested parties such as community members, funding agencies, and social service organizations. The intent comes from the Indigenous researchers who wish to work in partnership with a traditional Aboriginal community to complete respectful research. These ethical and reflexive research practices can gently guide Indigenous researchers, communities, and/or populations they are in partnership



with in a direction that promotes respectful research and an ethically safe place for all. The ethical space that is strived for can be reached through the coupling of culturally appropriate reflexive practices discussed in this article were put forth as a flexible and ever changing guideline. When people enter into this type of research relationship they may benefit from it, share it with their respective communities, and ensure that the outcomes are beneficial to all.

Within this chapter, I discussed the journey I shared with other Indigenous women throughout the research process using the concept of ethical space. I also shared the connection I felt with the traditional Indigenous women through the research journey which was grounded within current research standards. Furthermore, I introduced an Indigenous research methodology: sweetgrass story weaving, cultural reflexivity, and the importance of holism in Indigenous storytelling.

The next chapter will answer the following questions:

1. What are things you remember from your first moontime?
2. Did you do something special? If not, what would you have wanted to do?
3. What would you like to see for girls in your community for their first moontime?

## Chapter Three: Braiding Sweetgrass

### Results

As the women shared their first moontime experience, what they did or would have wanted to do, and what they want for future generations, they spoke from the heart. Woven through their stories was resilience, knowledge from looking back through lived experiences; hope and determination when looking forward to the future, and the shared theme of wanting their cultural traditions and ceremonies to live on through future generations of Indigenous girls and women.

The stories which were shared with me were an honour to hear. The women who took part in this research study were each special in their own way and were candid about their first moontime and what they want for future generations. Each woman deserves to be introduced on an individual basis before proceeding to combine their stories as one. Each story, each word was an honour to hear and I would like to ensure they are not seen as an amalgamated being.

*Butterfly Rock Woman* is 32 years old and shares that she was adopted from birth, but fortunate enough to stay in the same family due to her biological and adoptive mothers being sisters. She was the oldest child in her biological family but the family she was raised in she was approximately the middle child. Butterfly Rock Woman grew up understanding the culture and ways of living. She believes she was placed with her adoptive parents as it was customary for family members to assist with raising children. She attended college and university and is very proud to be Anishinaabe kwe today. Butterfly Rock Woman is currently a stay at home mother of six children and also works in the helping field as she enjoys helping other people.

*Rose Woman* was born in 1949 and is from a reserve on Manitoulin Island. She is from a large family of thirteen children and two of her sisters were raised by her grandparents. Rose Woman was the oldest in her family and remembers the feelings of loneliness and sadness from being taken by her nation to go to school in Spanish. At the school in Spanish, Ontario they cut her hair very short with bangs and dressed her in a uniform and white blouse. Rose Woman has recaptured her teachings and sees the beauty in honouring and giving to Nokomis Grandmother Moon. She has learned how we have alighted ourselves at the time, and to alight the feminine and masculine side of ourselves. Rose Woman uses the term alighted to define the rekindling of the fire within. She also shares we should be able to offer prayers to Nokomis with our cloth and semaa during the full moon cycle: “Nokomis takes care of us during this time, it regulates our cycles, regulates the tides, and even when to plant”.

"*The One That Flies Above*" of the Eagle Clan is 38 years old and was raised with her three brothers and one sister on a reserve with a population of 1200. She recalls having a very rough life and many people would drink alcohol around them. Presently, she is a single mother of four children and believes in trying to be a better parent to her children because she does not want them growing up the way she did. "The One That Flies Above" is blessed that they are not into drinking alcohol or drugs, and that they are really good kids. She shared that she is an alcoholic and at the time of this story telling has been sober for over two years. She attributes her culture and ceremony to saving her life and has vowed to keep going with her sobriety/healing journey. She began going to sweat lodges, fasting, sun dancing and is very grateful that she is still here to enjoy her children and grandchild.

*Lightning Woman* is from the Marten clan and was born in 1993. She is from an Ojibwe reserve on Manitoulin Island and lives mostly an Anishinabek lifestyle. Her mother is non-Native and her father is Ojibwe. She was raised by her mother since her father left when she was an infant. Although she was not brought into the traditional life until she was fifteen years old she was told it was never too late to complete her Berry Fast.

*Whitecloud Woman* is a 39-year-old Cree woman from northern Ontario and is from the Bear clan. She has three children aged 17, 15 and almost 2. She struggled with addictions (drugs, alcohol, pharmaceuticals, and heavy drugs) for most of her life, starting at age thirteen until her early thirties. For the past five years Whitecloud Woman has been actively participating in traditional ceremonies and is a hand drummer, Sun Dancer and helper. She believes in doing positive things for herself and is always looking for ways to help herself on her healing journey. She is currently taking a leave from school in the Addictions Counsellor program.

*Lokodug* was born in 1947 and is an Inuit Elder from a northern Ontario city where she has resided for thirty years. She lives with her husband to whom she has been married for over forty years. She uses her past experiences to help others with problems they may have. She is knowledgeable about Ojibwe and Inuit culture, traditions, and ceremonies. She shares this knowledge with her children, great grandchildren, and community members.

*Charlie* is a 27-year-old Ojibwe woman from a northeastern Ontario reserve. She grew up with her brother and parents in a sports-centred household. Her sports expertise brought her all over Ontario for various tournaments and events. She is involved with her community in many ways; culturally through drumming and ceremonies, and also professionally through recruitment and visiting other communities in Ontario. She currently lives in northern Ontario with her fiancé and looks forward to raising a family there.

*Bidaasa Kwe* was born in 1985 and is a young Ojibwe woman from Manitoulin Island who is the mother of a five-year-old son. Her Anishinaabe name means Radiant Light Woman. She grew up with three siblings and is the youngest in the family. Her mother was a single parent although her grandmother lived with her also. Bidaasa Kwe graduated with a Master of Indigenous Relations degree and continues to work on her own personal growth and development.

*Elizabeth* is a 35-year-old woman who grew up in a southern city with her five older brothers and her parents. She shared her story of her upbringing which includes sexual abuse and her parents' disregard when she disclosed it to them. She remembers growing up feeling unloved and she communicated this to her parents by getting in trouble with the law, using alcohol and drugs, and constantly running away from home. She continued this pattern until she had her daughter which is when she finally understood the meaning of unconditional love. After returning to her culture, educating herself with a university degree, and meeting her husband who returns her love she is becoming re-acquainted with her real self and enjoying her life journey.

As you can read, these women come from different walks of life, grew up in different generations and environments which has affected each of them differently. One thing these women do have in common is their moontime. It is the thread which holds them together as each of them has experienced it, knows what they would have wanted for their first moontime, and also what they want for future generations through the act of storytelling.

Storytelling is a traditional and cultural process within many Indigenous communities that assists in the transfer of knowledge. Having the traditional Indigenous women share their stories of their first moontime, what they did or would have wanted to do, and what they wish for future generations is a way to connect to the past, present and future through a culturally appropriate process. There are three sections:

1. Looking Back
2. In the Present
3. Looking Ahead

Within each section, there is discussion on the themes which presented themselves although the stories are to be seen as a whole. Moreover, as an Indigenous woman myself, I would like to share my story and use it as a starting point for the first three sections.

In the first section, Looking Back, the women's stories will be discussed through the lens of Body, Mind, and Spirit looking at the first moontime. There will be overlap between the stories due to the interconnected and interrelated nature of the three lenses which will also be

discussed throughout this section. In the Present Section, the stories the women shared will be discussed through the same lens, although they were able to use their present and conscious informed self to inform what they would have liked to do for their first moontime, if they did not do anything special. Within the third section, Looking Ahead, I will discuss the themes highlighted within the Body, Mind, and Spirit perspectives while also presenting the seven generations teachings, using their life stages as a part of the central framework for discussion.

Prior to this discussion, I will start this section off with my personal story of my first moontime, answering the question which was given to the Indigenous women: What are things you remember from your first moontime?

### **Looking Back**

As a young girl, I dreamt of being older and wiser. I wanted my moontime to start which meant to me I would be well on my way to being a woman, among other things. I listened to my two closest friends who started their moontime and I was instantly jealous. I wanted to join them with their stories about their moontime; the funny ones where they were in class and had to wrap their sweater around their waist because their pants had a red stain on them, the painful ones when they stayed home from school because their cramps were so severe, and also the excited ones when they purchased their first bra because they were now officially in puberty. During those days, I was a bystander who could not fully understand what they were going through but could imagine.

On the days leading up to my thirteenth birthday, my father shared with me that he was bringing me to the CN Tower in the revolving restaurant as my birthday present. I was so excited with the idea of getting dressed up and eating in a fancy restaurant. I went shopping with my mother and bought a green and white striped knit sweater with a white collar and black

velvet pants for my restaurant date with my father. My dinner with my father could not come fast enough and it felt like forever until the day came. On the day of my dinner date I prepared by doing my hair and my outfit was laid out on my bed ready for the evening. When I put on my outfit I felt so grown up and excited to spend the evening with my father and in such a grown-up environment.

Just before we left I went to use the washroom and that is when I started my moontime. I felt excited, overwhelmed and so proud of myself. I was almost thirteen, growing up and now I had the proof! I shared the news with my mother who made sure I had a pad on before I left and told me we would talk about it later. My father did not say anything to me about my first moontime but I remember the evening fondly and will always link the two together.

Upon returning home, my mother had bought supplies for me and taught me about cleanliness, when to change my pads, and where to dispose of them. My mother told me to keep it hidden and the importance of continuing to keep myself clean during this time. After this lesson from my mother, I was still curious about my moontime and what it really meant and I could not wait until Monday when I would return to school and tell my friends! On the following Monday, I told my two close friends and they smiled, laughed, and congratulated me. They asked me about where, when, and how it started so I shared my story with them. Following this conversation, when each of us were on our moontime we all understood what each other was going through. I felt like I was more part of the group now and we all had something in common we could discuss.

Apart from the lesson on hygiene with my mother, which was very important, I wanted to know more. What does my moontime really mean? What does my body do during my time? I went to the local library on my way home and picked up a book. I can't recall the name but it

was blue and had pictures in it. I read and reread that blue book until I had to bring it back to the library. Although I was a bit prepared because of my friends talking about their moontime, I sometimes wonder about what I missed. My mother taught me a lot about hygiene and how to use sanitary products but did not share much more.

I did not know about the cultural meaning that comes along with my moontime as my mother did not hold this type of traditional knowledge when I was young. I was a bit prepared for my moontime to begin as my friends around me talked about it openly. I did not dread my first moontime because it held special meaning to me; it meant that I was growing up and during this time in my life, I wanted to grow up so quickly.

Some areas in my experience can be reflected in the stories the women shared about their first moontime, while others are very different. This results section is from the women's first moontime experience from a holistic perspective: through Body, Mind, and Spirit.

**First moontime, body experience.** Reading through the stories, two themes emerged when looking at their first moontime from a Body perspective which consisted of preparation and education. The first theme contains subthemes: unprepared and prepared in the context of these young women's first moontime.

***Preparation: unprepared.*** Rose Woman remembered her mother never talked about what was going to happen to her so when she experienced her first moontime she did not know what was happening. She thought she was sick because nothing was ever explained to her ahead of time. Looking back, she believes she was a late bloomer at sixteen years old. She recalls: "a day went by and I finally told my mother" who responded in Anishinaabe: "Oh you have started your moontime"? Her mother showed her how to use old flannel sheets to make into a type of napkin and instructed her to wash them in water after but Rose Woman threw them away and

used more flannel every month. Another woman who had a similar experience was Whitecloud Woman who began her first moontime when she was out at a community function. She recalled saying: “When I seen that I started my time and you know I was excited because I had been waiting and some of my friends had already started and I was excited to go talk to my mom about it”. She wanted her mother to sit and talk with her about it but her mother did not say anything. She recalls her mother giving her a feminine hygiene product and saying: “This is what you use.” When Whitecloud Woman tried to engage her by asking, “Well how often should I change it?”, her mother was not really responsive and told her to change when she needed to.

Charlie who is a 27-year-old Ojibwe woman from northeastern Ontario shares her story of her first moontime.

I think I got mine a little bit later, I remember I was probably in about Grade 8, so 14 or 13 or something. I remember I felt funny and I think I was like screaming at my mom from the bathroom, there is brown stuff or something like that, so then she came up, she was kind of not overwhelmed in a bad way but just she was like: this is normal and okay.

Charlie’s mother never made her feel uncomfortable and shared feminine hygiene practices with her: “She had pads there, she helped me set up and whatever and then from then on it was just like kind of something that I just expected and just happened and then I went with it.” Although Charlie’s first moontime showed the act of being unprepared, she was physically prepared for her subsequent cycles.

Bidaasa Kwe also shares her story of the first time she started her moontime:

Well I did not know I had it at all. I remember I was sleeping over at a friend’s house. When all the parents would go out drinking we were just kind of left on our own, I think I was 13 at the time ... I could not wrap my head around it. So, the other girls, they were like “your pants are weird”, I’m like what? My pants aren’t weird, and I was really insecure about it. So, we were there and it was hard for me to understand and then one girl is like “here”, gave me a pad, “go put this on”. She was actually younger than me and she said she had her time so she was like, go put this on. I was like “I don’t need that, what are you talking about?”, so I put it on and we went to the beach. She said “you can’t go swimming” I’m like I can go swimming and she said “no you can’t go



swimming”, she said you are on your moontime. I was like “what” I did not know what moontime meant.

As these Indigenous women look back on their first moontime there is a theme of being unprepared which ranged from not knowing what was happening to understanding something was changing and reaching out for their mothers for assistance. The assistance which was provided to the young women at that time mostly consisted of education in the area of feminine hygiene which covers the physical education; what was not discussed when these women looked back on their first moontime was the emotional/mental and spiritual aspect.

***Preparation: prepared.*** There were two women who shared their stories who had a different experience. These women were prepared with education via traditional teachings which highlighted the importance of them as life-givers and powerful women.

Butterfly Rock Woman completed her Berry Fast one year after she started her first moontime:

My first moontime, I remember, I was at an elementary school, I think I was in Grade 7 probably, not sure what time of the year probably September/October. It was kind of nice out I remember walking home and you know my underwear was full of blood and you know, I knew I was becoming a woman just from the teachings I heard from people. So, at that time I don’t know how I felt, if I was happy to have transitioned because that is what it meant, a time of transition entering that young adulthood and so you know that was at that time and I guess just feeling uncomfortable, having to ask my father to get the supplies, like pads and stuff. So that was about my first moontime I guess.

Out of her immediate family, she completed her Berry Fast along with her sister.

Butterfly Rock Woman’s aunts, who are spiritual people, know the Berry Fast ceremony and teachings. Her aunts, mother, and birth mother encouraged her to do this one year fast so she did with her cousin. The first night of her Berry Fast was in August or September and she stayed with her cousin at her aunt’s place where they were placed in her room together. The next day Butterfly Rock Woman and her cousin went into a grandmother’s lodge: “We just fasted together

the two of us that next night and so that was kind of like the beginning of connecting with spirituality”.

When she was completing her Berry Fast she lived with her biological mother to have that connection with her and develop a relationship. She recalls there were a lot of things that she could not do. She had to abstain from berries, could not wear makeup, and if there were any men’s belongings that may have been on the floor she could not step over it so she had to pick it up. Butterfly Rock Woman shares the reason behind this was to learn about the power of women especially when they are on our moontime: “...we could harm the men or harm people when we are on our moontime because we are so spiritual and powerful at that time”. During this year, she remembers one of her fathers taking her out to pick sweetgrass and berries to prepare for her give away which include strawberries as part of the food for the feast when her one year was complete.

At that time, she did not realize her father was helping her prepare for that one year but looking back she is really appreciative for those experiences. She remembers after one year she went fasting again with her cousin to end her Berry Fast and their cousins helped build the lodges and she was really grateful. Her family came together during this time to support her and their cousin in what they were doing. Butterfly Rock Woman believes if her family was not helping her along the way she would not be the woman she is today.

Lokoduq, who is part of the Inuit nation, also completed her rites of passage although it was quite different from Butterfly Rock Woman. When Lokoduq started her moontime she remembers she had to start walking a little bit more ladylike and talk less which she did not really want to because she felt it was too grown up for her. Lokoduq’s father was very determined to bring her up traditionally. The winter she completed her coming out ceremony

involved a potlatch which is when another village comes to theirs, they dance for them, and gifts are provided to the visitors. As part of her preparation, her aunt told her there was a dance she had to learn:

...she would sing the songs and she taught me every single little flick so I learned, I did not know I was going to dance with my dad. I did not know any of this. I just thought she was teaching me that because it is part of my stage.

Lokoduq had to dress in a particular parka, hat, belt and two hand holders which she put aside as her father had two galvanized buckets full of socks, gloves, material, tobacco which he gave every single person at the giveaway with Lokoduq. When the giveaway was complete, he started to sing the song her aunt taught her:

...he started that song and I just looked at the drummers and they were singing the song that my aunt had sang. Then my dad took his feathers, the male kind and he knelt down in front of me and we are both facing the door when they started. My dad did not even talk to me, did not say anything to me but when he started moving I knew that that was the dance I knew so I joined him and we danced for quite a while. The way we danced, kind of normal introducing the words that they are singing, the movement and then we would go faster and faster. It is the drums that go faster, faster and faster so after one full version of the dance, the other one goes a little bit faster. It goes all the way and by the fifth time we are really dancing then. Like, I have to follow the beat. I was so surprised that my dad as I could see my dad dancing even though once a turn you flick one little feather kind of and he would do that at the same time, I was so amazed. When we were done, he had me look at everyone and then he said that I could go.

This was Lokoduq's coming out ceremony; its purpose was to show young men or older people with young men that she now had the ability to bear children. They were not allowed to get married to people in their own village at that time, so that is why she did the dance for the other village members.

Lokoduq and Butterfly Rock Woman's first moontime experiences were treated quite differently than the others. Although there was some education regarding hygiene provided in the former experiences, the latter was not focused on that particular aspect during their

storytelling. The focus of the latter experiences was a spiritual one, with the former stories focusing more on the physical aspect.

***Post-moontime education.*** Many of the women who told their story were provided with education after they started their moontime. Elizabeth was 14 when she started her first moontime and recalled what occurred after she told her mother:

So, when I got my time and I told her about it she gave me a little booklet, just a little booklet. There were pictures in there about the female system and so I had to make sense of what I am looking at and that is my experience you know.

Lightning Woman recalls her first moontime when her mother explained that it was normal and showed her how to use feminine hygiene products. Her mother shared with her that it is just something that happened and to hide it as best she can so that nobody really notices, which Lightning Woman says “was from a white perspective”:

It is just something that happened and you hide it as best you can and you wrap your pads so that nobody really notices them and that is what she taught me. So, I did not have those teachings, those Anishinabek teachings until I was 15 and older and I believe I had my first time when I was 11 so that is about four years that I did not have that understanding of what it really meant.

Although Bidaasa Kwe did not know what her moontime was when she first started in grade eight although was provided with some education a year after her first moontime. She attended high school out of town since there was no high school in her community; she boarded with a family out of town. The mother who lived there taught her about her moontime; when she learned what it was and how to take care of herself during this time:

Well I went to high school in North Bay for about 4, 5 months because I asked a family if I could stay with them, I would babysit their kids all the time. When I was younger to keep myself out of trouble I would babysit for other families. The parents would want to go out and drink so I would stay with them. So, I asked them when they moved to North Bay if I could move with them. They said ‘well, we will have to talk about this’ and then they said ‘okay’. So, when I was there, the mom taught me about my period, so it is like ‘okay I get this now’. She gave me my first tampon: ‘here, we are going to take you swimming but you have to wear this’. I’m like ‘what?’ So, she ripped it open and then

she was trying to teach me how to do it. I'm like, in the bathroom, remember holding it saying I don't know what this is for but I came out and I'm like 'I'm not comfortable with doing anything down there' and she was like 'okay that is fine, but just know you can't go swimming'. I said that's fine, I will just stay home and do stuff.

***Difference between education and preparation.*** There can be a difference between education of a topic and ensuring young women are ready for their moontime before it happens. Education is the learning of information about young women's first moontime either before, during, or after it occurs. Young women can be given education in this area whereas preparation can be seen as part of the education but also ensuring they understood what their moontime really means, what to expect and also why it is such an important rite of passage for them. Education can be provided by the teacher which in this case is the mother or maternal figure but it is up to the receiver to hear it, process it, and be able to understand it. Education is the act of providing content whereas the act of being prepared is a reaction to the content provided.

Another factor is the type of learning style each young woman learns best with; some learn better by listening, others by reading, others by experiencing, and some a mixture of each one. As you read about Bidaasa Kwe's first moontime she did not know what it was but dealt with it for about a year before she was provided with education from a maternal figure. Only then did she understand what her moontime was and how to live with it which speaks to the idea of experiential learning not working well for her; she coupled it with education from another woman and then she was fully able to understand what her moontime was. Another example is Elizabeth when she began her first moontime, her mother provided her with a booklet. Elizabeth did not find this helpful as she wanted to talk with her mother, ask questions and fully understand what was going on not solely through experience and reading but by hearing her mother talk about her moontime.

The traditional Indigenous women who shared their first moontime experience were similar in some regards but different in others. There were different degrees of readiness which ranged from not knowing about it at all to anticipating its arrival. Another area of interest is the mothers' reactions and subsequent information regarding their first moontime. Whitecloud Woman tells the story of her mother not talking with her about her moontime:

My first moon was not like... I did not get any teachings or preparation from my mother. My mother is a residential school survivor so I really understand the impact that that had on her life and you know her parenting skills. So, when I did get my first moontime it was nothing, it was no big deal. I kind of expected and wanted her to sit down with me and have a talk with me about it and she did not say anything. She said here, gave me a maxi pad and said this is what you use... So that is all that that was. Like I remember when I did, I was out at a community function when it happened, when I seen that I started my time and you know I was excited because I had been waiting and some of my friends had already started and I was excited to go talk to my mom about it and it was kind of sad that you know that it was not made special. But that is just the way it was.

Historically, Indigenous children were placed in residential schools away from their families, communities, and nations.

These residential schools were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture... The schools were in existence for well over 100 years, and many successive generations of children from the same communities and families endured the experience of them (Truth and Reconciliation Report, 2015).

When we look at focused maternal pedagogy in the area of moontime, what did these women's mothers re-experience from their first moontime and in turn, pass on to their daughters? There should be attention placed on where the maternal figures acquire their messaging and how they transfer that knowledge to young Indigenous women who are starting their first moontime. From a pedagogical standpoint, maternal figures would most likely share the knowledge they have. If the original knowledge involved the sacredness of a woman's moontime, then the disruption which occurred in residential schools can be seen as a result of colonization.

There was a weakening cultural connection for young Indigenous children who were taught a different culture and language and taught along the way to devalue their own when they attended residential schools. Through various stages of indoctrination, it was quite common for many of these children to assimilate and place their original beliefs and traditions to the wayside. Furthermore, if these young Indigenous women were gifted with their first moontime while in residential school, the messaging that accompanied this from a nun or teacher would be quite different from their maternal figures. It can be said that this part of the dilution and ignoring of strong Indigenous teachings regarding moontime was under the premise of success in the new world. The new world, which was taught in residential schools, did not consist of Indigenous languages, culture, and traditions; it consisted of mainstream ideals where success was seen as embracing the non-Indigenous ways which many of the children were raised in.

This is one avenue where the new messaging may have started and continued throughout new generations of young woman starting their moontime. There is not a clear dichotomy of mainstream and Indigenous views of moontime; there is a connection between the two views and many other perspectives in between. These opposing views come from the blended history of many Indigenous children who attended residential school and some who did not, many who returned home and rejected their original traditional ways and some who did not, and also those who married non-Indigenous people and those who did not. The differing views are not limited to the areas mentioned but encompass a good portion of divergent perspectives of women's moontime.

Another perspective is the strengthening of cultural connection between women through the continuation and practice of the original traditional practice of celebrating young women's first moontime. This was highlighted in Butterfly Rock Woman and Lokoduq's story of when

they began their first moontime. Through focused maternal pedagogy in the area of moontime, Butterfly Rock Woman talked about her mothers and aunts who are spiritual people and encouraged her to complete her Berry Fast, provided her with the resources needed, and offered support throughout. Lokoduq's story had the presence of an aunt who taught her the dance she was to perform during her coming out ceremony.

Interestingly, with Lokoduq, Bidaasa Kwe and Butterfly Rock Woman there was the presence of a male who assisted them with their transition from girl to woman. Lokoduq talks about her father and the presence he had in her life which included the transition from girl to woman. The pedagogical approach to her first moontime had a gender balanced approach with her aunt playing a role and also her father through the dance they shared in her coming out ceremony and also the giveaway he prepared as part of it.

Furthermore, there was the presence of subtle caresses which is seen in the formal area of teaching in an educational setting. In the area of education, a teaching caress is a gesture of care for another person, without demanding carefulness. It is a gesture of pure duration, without self-righteous purity, in its contact with the beauty, truth and value of the teachable moment (Smith, 2012). A prime example of a subtle caress is through a moment Lokodug shared with her father when she was making him a coffee:

Yet when I had my first time and I told my mom about it and then she told my dad about it and then my dad treated me so important like, the way he looked at me when I poured his coffee or tea.

Another example of paternal involvement was with Butterfly Rock Woman when she was preparing for her feast to mark the end of her yearlong Berry Fast. She remembers one of her fathers taking her out to pick sweetgrass and berries to prepare for her give away: "So, you



know at that time I did not realize like what he was doing but he was helping me prepare for that one year...”

Bidaasa Kwe shared that her uncle would take her to ceremonies and teach her culture when she was between the ages of eight and eleven:

Okay so as I’m growing up I remember my uncle would start to take me because he was the Chief of Police. He would take me to his place and I would play with the kids over there and then he started turning traditional and he would bring me around ceremonies and we would travel a lot. We went to Alberta for ceremonies, Saskatchewan. So, I grew up around that, we would go picking sage in the States, like all the medicines down there. He would always take me. It felt really good. Like when I look back I am really happy he did that and he made my mom buy me a dress so we can take her out on these trips, so she got me a dress. They were very strict around my dress. I had to be very careful. I could not do this, could not do that, can’t run around in your dress, you have to be very respectful for your dress. That is what I remember being disciplined in that way, like my dress was another entity basically. Treat my dress with all respect.

Bidaasa Kwe’s relationship with her uncle is another clear example of the importance of balanced gender approach to education and preparation of not only a women’s first moontime but also a strong cultural base which she was able to plant herself upon as she lived her life.

Furthermore, there was a remarkable moment worth noting between Rose Woman and her father which highlights the importance of paternal involvement in these young women’s lives. Rose Woman attended residential school and would return home during the summer months. She recalls her parents were putting her on the bus to go back for the school year, and she displayed her unwillingness to go back to residential school:

I grabbed onto my mom’s waistline and I still remember, we all went to Manitowaning and she had no time to take off her apron. So, I remember her wearing a dress and an apron and they were trying to put me on a bus and I just cried, just from the pit of my stomach I cried so hard until my father said in Anishinaabe: “Well, let’s just take her home”.

Rose Woman was able to stay home and she went to school in her community. Thinking back to this event she believes it was her father's way of showing love since he never physically or verbally displayed any type of love.

Although there is importance in the maternal relationships these women have, there is significance behind paternal relationships also. As women are the keepers of the water and life givers, men's roles include keepers of the fire and family providers. There is a balance in the relationships and roles of women and men which should be emphasized and shown throughout the women's stories.

**First moontime, mind experience.** Two themes emerged when looking at traditional Indigenous women's first moontime from a Mind perspective which encompasses the mental and emotional aspects of a person. The first theme: unknown, was shared when they started their moontime and it had two subthemes: fear and embrace. The second theme: meaning, which occurred when they thought about their first moontime and what their thoughts and feelings were regarding the impact it would or would not have on their lives.

The women who talked about their first moontime had different reactions from an emotional and mental aspect. Their reactions varied from fearing what they did not understand because they were not prepared or given any prior education to the act of embracing it since they were prepared and were given education. The reaction of not knowing what was happening to them because there was no preparation or education given seems understandable. The cleansing act of a woman's moontime can be alarming if she is not aware of what is happening.

***Fear of the unknown.*** Elizabeth shares her experience of fear of the unknown when she began her first moontime at age fourteen. She remembers being scared because she did not know anything about it other than what other girls would talk about. Elizabeth wanted her

mother's affection and attention and shared she wanted "all that girl stuff you know and I always hoped, hoped and hoped but it would not come so I just ended up taking off again and started searching for somebody who gave a shit, you know."

Lightning Woman also recalls her first moontime when she bled in her underwear and then tried to hide it:

I remember being, that was the time I was still in like the western style of living so I remember I bled in my underwear and then I tried to hide it. I felt really ashamed like "what is going on?" and then I talked to my mom and she said oh that is okay, that is normal and she showed me how to use the pad and tampon and everything and told me it is okay but being white she never told me anything like, she never told me how sacred it is or anything like that.

Rose Woman, Elizabeth, and Lightning Woman were all unprepared and received no proper education prior to experiencing their first moontime. Lightning Woman mentioned she was ashamed, Rose Woman thought she was ill, and Elizabeth felt scared. These were the thoughts and feelings which were shared from the Mind perspective which can be linked to the level of preparedness and education regarding a young woman's first moontime.

***Embracing the known.*** Emotions and feelings are quite diverse when looking from the viewpoint of traditional Indigenous women who were prepared and received moontime education.

When "The One That Flys Above" was twelve years old she began her first moontime. She was getting ready to head out with friends and noticed that she started. She already knew she was going to get it because her mom warned her about it:

I was getting ready to head out with friends and as I was dressing up I noticed that I started my moontime and I already knew that I was going to get it because my mom warned me about it, like she told me to not be scared when I had it and so that is what happened, I saw spotting so I just went up to my grandparents and told my grandmother and she gave me some pads and asked me if I knew how to put them on and I said yeah and that is it. I had my moontime and off I went.

Butterfly Rock Woman grew up understanding the culture and ways of living a traditional Indigenous life so when she began her first moontime she understood what was happening as she was provided with the traditional teachings and understood the importance of the transition she was embarking upon.

The second theme within the Mind section is meaning, and to further explore it is split into two sub themes: no meaning and meaning. The amount of meaning which was placed upon these women's first moontime was dependent upon the type of education and preparation which was provided. When young Indigenous women are provided with more education and preparation, the level of meaning may change accordingly, depending upon the type of education that is provided and also the level of preparation they are given.

*No meaning.* Charlie shares when she began her first moontime her mother helped her with feminine hygiene products. She also remembers there was no discussion of her becoming a woman or what it really meant on an emotional, mental level; but her mother did cover the physical aspect very well. This can provide a clear example of a young Indigenous woman being provided with physical education which resulted in her moontime having a lower level of meaning. As mentioned earlier, it is shown when Charlie shared, ... "it was just like kind of something that I just expected and just happened and then I went with it". She also received a bit of preparation because her mother did share that it was coming and would happen at some point.

When Whitecloud Woman began her first moontime she expected and wanted her mother to sit and talk with her about it but she did not say anything. She recalls her mother giving her a feminine hygiene product and saying: "This is what you use." Her level of preparation for her moontime was low, along with the education that came along with it.

As "The One That Flies Above" described above about her first moontime can be construed as not having any meaning although she knew it would be happening. Her experience with her first moontime may have had higher levels of education and preparation, but was not from a holistic perspective since the spiritual aspect was missing. This may explain the perceived lack of meaning of a traditional Indigenous woman's moontime.

**Meaning.** On the other hand, there were women who did share their first moontime meaning something to them at the time because of their preparedness and education in the area of traditional knowledge. When Lokoduq started her first cycle she knew something was going to be happening. As mentioned previously, she knew she would have to start walking a little bit more lady like although she also remembers she did not really want to because that was too grown up for her. Butterfly Rock Woman shared her story of her first moontime when was walking home and realizing her underwear was full of blood and at that moment, knew she was becoming a woman just from the teachings she heard.

Lokoduq and Butterfly Rock Woman both were prepared and received education in the area of holistic, traditional knowledge. With this type of preparation and education which focused on the spiritual aspect, the meaning was more profound although may have taken some time to get used to. Butterfly Rock Woman was unsure of how she felt, but recalled the moontime teachings she had received from her female relatives and knew she was becoming a woman; she understood the transition which was occurring and the importance surrounding it.

**Negative meaning.** Another avenue of meaning which was experienced by one of the women was one of negativity. Rose Woman remembers one of the things her mother told after she started her moontime:

One of the things she did say was never let a man touch you...That is just what she said to me and I thought, wow. When I have my own daughters, oh, I will try and teach them all

that I know not from what I learned from my mother but what I learnt throughout the years about the moon cycle. It is a very special gift from the creator, how we go through our menstruation every month. I know like back in the day, in my era how we were made to feel like in the sense of Christianity, how we were made to feel dirty about our bodies but that is not what it is.

Unfortunately, this type of thinking within Christianity was common and due to the link between Indigenous peoples and residential schools, this may have been something which was learned there or passed down generationally. The type of education which is given to young Indigenous women when they begin their first moontime (and before to prepare) is of the utmost importance to ensure that holistic, traditional knowledge is passed down to the next generation in a good way.

**First moontime, spirit experience.** Two themes emerged when looking at traditional Indigenous women's first moontime from a Spirit perspective. The first theme: disconnection is discussed within the context of the women's stories and relevant literature. The second theme: connection is also shared through the women's stories. Although the themes may feel dichotomous, there are varying degrees of connection which will be explored throughout the spiritual experiences shared.

**Disconnection.** When some of the women began their first moontime, they shared that there was no spiritual connection. This may have occurred for different reasons; historical and intergenerational trauma, or different cultural teachings. Lightning Woman has already shared that because her mother was "white" she was never told her how sacred her moontime was. Whitecloud Woman also shared that she wanted to connect with her mother during her first moontime but was unable to. She understood that due to historical reasons her mother did not talk with her about her moontime. When Whitecloud Woman tried to engage her mother, she was not really responsive and told her to change when she needed to. Rose Woman also recalled

that her mother did not explain how special her moontime was and how the Creator was cleansing her body.

Young Indigenous women transitioning towards womenhood are searching for who they are, like other young women. Within the society we live in, there are strong mainstream ideals about what being a woman, in general, entails. This can include being sexually active, wearing make-up, and being part of a relationship with someone they are attracted to. Young women who begin their moontime are usually in their early teenage years or possibly younger and have to manoeuvre between these mainstream ideas and also what is expected of them as Indigenous women.

Having a strong cultural identity before this time is helpful since they would already be on a path they are familiar with. Other young Indigenous women who did not have the spiritual connection were disconnected from this aspect as they began their transition to womenhood. They may have been searching for something they felt was missing but were unsure of what it was because it was never offered to them. The reasons for the Indigenous traditional teachings around their moontime not being offered would have occurred for a multitude of reasons. Some reasons may include mothers who are not Indigenous so were unaware of the teachings, Indigenous mothers not sharing the teachings with their daughters because they themselves were not told due to attending residential school or their parents attending, and also children who were taken from their homes by child welfare and raised in non-Indigenous homes. The reasons I have shared are not the only reasons why a young Indigenous woman would not receive moontime teachings but they are a few I have mentioned in order for the reader to understand the reasoning behind it.

When young Indigenous women do not receive, or experience their rite of passage after their first moontime, the transition they experience has a missing aspect which is spirituality. The moontime teachings explain their role within the Indigenous community and the important responsibility of being life givers, and having respect for themselves. Without this integral information, young Indigenous women mature and grow physically, mentally, and emotionally although without the spirituality there is no balance. Spirituality within Indigenous society is linked to their cultural identity. When young Indigenous women miss these teachings, they may feel like they are missing a connection to their maternal figures, and to themselves as a significant part of their cultural identity. When young Indigenous women are missing a part of their cultural identity they may begin looking to fill that void in a variety of ways.

Some Indigenous women will expand their other aspects looking to fill the emptiness which happens when spirituality is missing. How these women expand their other aspects may be healthy, unhealthy or a mixture of both. Young Indigenous women may excel in sports from their physical aspect like Charlie, have many friends and a good home life which allows their emotional and mental health to flourish. Others may use their physicality to fill the void that is missing when their cultural identity is absent through alcohol or drugs like Elizabeth; others may not have a stable home life which can decrease their mental and emotional functioning while still trying to find out who they are as young Indigenous women with their spiritual aspect being overlooked or not even knowing about it, as in the story of Bidaasa Kwe. There are young Indigenous women in society today who are well-respected and successful from a mainstream perspective while still feeling unfulfilled because they are unaware of the importance of exploring their cultural identity. Spiritual connection to themselves through their rite of passage can assist them with achieving holistic fulfillment. It is never too late for Indigenous women to



reclaim their traditional teachings and understand their roles and responsibilities within their respective Indigenous communities.

**Connection.** The women who were able to experience their rite of passage shared the connection they felt to themselves, but also with other women, the land, and spirituality. As mentioned earlier, Butterfly Rock Woman knew she was becoming a woman from the teachings she heard growing up. During her fast on the land which signified the beginning of her Berry Fast, Butterfly Rock Woman had a dream about a bear coming towards her lodge:

It just went around the lodge because it had seen that cedar there so I guess at that time I was scared and so the grandmothers told me about that cedar to help me feel more at ease and so you know that dream it seems like reality in that sense you know so that was just confirming what the grandmothers were telling me about the cedar. For me that was enhancing that belief, that power, that strength, that medicine and so I guess as a young girl and growing and understanding about our dreams and our things I guess in the form of spirit. You know so for me that was something I had to learn and experience myself and to have that deeper belief and understanding of things, I guess the spirit of that medicine, and the spirit of the animals and the spirit of myself.

Anderson (2011) shares that for land-based cultures, fasting was important because it was a reminder of the tenuous nature of everyone's survival and the necessity of establishing good relationships with animals and the food they provided (pp. 85). The spiritual connection of Butterfly Rock Woman, the land, and her dreams were apparent when she was fasting in the bush. She was connected to the land, understood the significance of her purpose for being out there and also her dreams. As Anderson (2011) shared the significance of fasting and its connection to animals and the land, Butterfly Rock Woman also understood this concept and was not only able to spiritually connect with the land, she was able to reach a deeper level of consciousness through her dreams.

Butterfly Rock Woman also remembered feeling scared although the grandmothers had told her about that cedar to help her feel more at ease. The dream Butterfly Rock Woman had

seemed like reality and was confirming what the grandmothers had told her about the cedar. Anderson (2011) also shares that puberty was considered an optimal time for learning, experiencing spiritual enlightenment, and building commitment; it was because of this powerful and liminal state it was extremely important how a girl conducted herself during this time. Her behaviour during seclusion would determine how she would live her life (pp. 87).

With support and spiritual connection to other women, young Indigenous women are able to expand and magnify their spiritual self which is an integral part of their holistic health. With spiritual connection during their transition from girl to women, young Indigenous women are able to focus on solidifying their cultural identity. Depending upon the type of education and preparation which they experience, their spiritual connection to their moontime and to other women will vary. Physical education is essential and was given to most of the women who shared their stories either before or after their first moontime. Mental and emotional preparation was provided to some of the women also, although for the most part, it was offered after their moontime began. From a holistic perspective, the aspect which is missing with many of the women who were interviewed was the spiritual aspect of their moontime. Although this aspect was missing for many during their first moontime, it does not necessarily mean it was missing from their lives forever.

A few of the women shared they were fortunate enough to experience their rite of passage when they began their first moontime while others were able to receive the teachings at a later time in their life. Although Indigenous women's rites of passage should take place when they begin their first moontime, some still desire to experience it although they have many responsibilities as they have grown older. Lightning Woman admits that looking back at her first moontime experience was such a missed opportunity and how much easier it would have

been to complete her Berry Fast when she was younger. As she thinks about completing it now at age twenty-four she shares: "...I am on my own and I have my own apartment and it is just hard to go and fast for a whole week when you have to kind of upkeep your life like that".

There are multifaceted variables when looking at the different degrees of spiritual connection with Indigenous women and their moontime. There are historical, societal, socio-economic, and familial factors which have an effect on how Indigenous women connect from a spiritual standpoint when experiencing their moontime, and also being provided with the opportunity to participate in a rite of passage. Historically, their families and communities may not have been given the opportunity to conduct their traditional ceremonies, including their rites of passage ceremonies, due to the enforcement of the Indian Act and its assimilative policies. The assimilative policies included the enfranchisement policy, residential schools, and also legal retribution through the legal system if caught conducting ceremonies. From a societal viewpoint, young Indigenous women during this time in their lives are most likely being bombarded with messages from the media which are enforced by their friends, family, and community. Within society, gender roles become more defined through media messaging such as magazines, television, and social media which all further cement these gender roles while family, friends, and the community reward them through acceptance and approval.

Indigenous women and their families' socio-economic status will have a direct effect on the resources available to them. The higher their socio-economic status, the more available resources they may have at their disposal. The accessible resources include basic necessities of life being covered without having to spend a majority of their time earning them. eg. shelter, food, and clothing costs with remaining money for extras such as a vehicle, extracurricular activities, and free time with the family for leisure activities. Within the context of Indigenous

women's moontime and traditions, if they have a healthy socioeconomic status, they are able to meet their basic necessities easily and are possibly able to explore other areas to better their lives, including free time to possibly participate in Indigenous traditions and ceremonies. In contrast, this is not to say only people with a higher socioeconomic status will have more time to devote to their Indigenous roots; there are many people who live within a lower socioeconomic status who are rich in their Indigenous culture and traditions, but it may play a factor along with historical, societal and familial factors. Others may be more focused on providing the basic necessities of life for themselves and/or their families, that the exploration of their Indigenous traditions may not be at the forefront. Another perspective is the higher the socioeconomic status, the easier the access to consumer goods is which may make it easier to prepare, conduct, or participate in ceremonies.

Lastly, another factor which may have an effect on Indigenous women, their moontime, and opportunity to participate in their rite of passage is family. There are many Indigenous families who live a holistic lifestyle and pass this on to their children. Other families, due to colonization, focus on living within mainstream society and pass down these values to their children. While this type of living is still productive, it does seem to be missing a spiritual aspect through incorporation and teaching of Indigenous traditions. Furthermore, there are families who are reclaiming their Indigenous culture, and passing it down to their children who may be older or are bypassing their children and focusing on their grandchildren.

These are a few of the multitude of factors which affect Indigenous women, their moontime, and their opportunity to participate in their rites of passage. With these factors, the varying degrees of spiritual connection is complex and ever changing. Although there is no formula for increasing the spiritual connection for Indigenous women, we can begin to

understand the various factors which will have an impact on them. As we look at the various factors, we can start to think about what we would like to see for future generations, but also thinking about what factors or experiences could have changed the spiritual connection for the traditional Indigenous women who shared their stories.

Within this first section, Looking Back, the traditional Indigenous women shared their stories of their first moontime. Their stories highlighted themes from a Spirit perspective: connection and disconnection, while also discussing their varying degrees. Also, from a Mind perspective, the theme: known was shared and within it there were two subthemes: fear and embrace. The second theme within the Mind perspective which was shared was: meaning of their moontime on their lives, if any. The traditional Indigenous women also talked about their moontime from the Body perspective and the third themes were shared: preparation and education within the context of their first moontime.

In the next section, we will look at Indigenous women and their moontime in the present, conscious and informed. Before that I will share my story as I look back at my first moontime and answer the same question as the Indigenous women: Did you do something special? If not, what would you have wanted to do?

### **In the Present, Conscious and Informed**

I am able to look back on my first moontime and see it through a different lens. As I was going through it as a 13-year-old young woman my thoughts and reasoning were still maturing. I can look back and appreciate it differently now that I am older and have children of my own. I thank my mother for teaching me about the physical aspect of feminine hygiene and how to use the products properly. This teaching provided me with self-respect and to properly care for myself when I was on my moontime.

I was also fortunate to be celebrating my birthday on that day although it was not my actual birth day. It felt like I was celebrating becoming a woman although that was not the premise behind the fancy dinner with my father. I have linked the two events in my mind as one cohesive event although they were two separate ones. The transition from childhood to adolescence may be difficult for some. It was very hard for me as I struggled with who I was as a young woman in a society where I believed being beautiful and popular were the most important things. I wanted to achieve that immensely and I tried many ways although many were not successful.

I did not have my Algonquin culture in my life at this time; it was introduced in my early adult years. Before this happened, I felt like I was floating adrift in life. I believe I would have benefitted from being prepared for my Berry Fast, provided with the accompanying teachings, and the limitations of a one year fast. This may have provided more stability in my life which I did have from a home perspective, but not a spiritual one.

This upcoming section is from the Indigenous women's perspectives of their first moontime experience and listening to their stories about if they were able to do something special for their first moontime, and if not, what would you have wanted to do. The results are shared thorough a holistic perspective: Body, Mind, and Spirit.

**In the present, body perspective.** Each woman was asked what they would have liked to have done for their first moontime with the knowledge they carry presently. From the Body perspective, the themes acknowledgment, and experience were highlighted. The action of these women's moontime was an experience in itself; the type of experience they would have liked to have is what they are sharing. Acknowledgement of their first moontime would be the starting point of the type of experience they would have liked to have had.

***Acknowledgement.*** There are different types of acknowledgment which can be provided to a young woman when she starts her first moontime: public, personal, and private, which can be expressed singularly or as a combination. Public acknowledgment may consist of parental figures informing the family members and she is congratulated or possibly teased, by some. A contrasting public acknowledgment if she follows her Indigenous traditions, she may partake in a rite of passage to signify her transition which includes being visited by maternal figures, and also able to attend women's circles. The ability to attend women's circles now that she has started her moontime can be viewed as a passive public acknowledgement since no one verbally announces this young woman is able to attend women's circles, but it will be known in her family and community.

Personal acknowledgement can be seen through a young woman intrinsically experiencing her first moontime and being aware of the impact this has on her from a holistic perspective. Other forms of personal acknowledgment may come from belonging to another group of women who have transitioned into womenhood. This young woman may understand her power as a life giver now which speaks to a deep and personal acknowledgment with herself, Spirit, and the Creator. Furthermore, there may be a private acknowledgment which can strengthen bonds between female figures (mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts), or as mentioned earlier with Lokoduq and her father with a subtle caress of a look or a gesture.

Acknowledgement, in this context, means to be recognized for no longer being a young girl, but a woman who is able to give life. This acknowledgement can be shown by a marker of some sort: a dinner, speech, or a special conversation with each other. It can be a simple congratulatory hug, maternal figures welcoming a young woman to a new life stage, sharing of information with family, or a special celebration. Whitecloud Woman was succinct with her

wish of what she would have liked to have when she experienced her first moontime which included her mother:

Maybe have a special dinner and just to have some time with her personally just to explain to me, not even the traditional aspect of it but what it is. Like this is you becoming a woman and you are able to give life now and that kind of thing. Yeah, just to have some recognition would have been nice because it is a big thing. It is a big thing in a young girl's life.

Whitecloud Woman shared that she wanted acknowledgement for having her first moontime, but she also touched on wanting connection with her mother. Whitecloud Woman and her need for acknowledgment from her mother can translate into a private acknowledgment which could have been used to strengthen the bond between herself and her mother. As Whitecloud Woman shared her story she did not realize how important it is as a woman to have that recognition because she can feel the importance of it now.

Lightning Woman would have liked to have a moontime celebration:

Knowing what I know now, I would have loved to have that first moontime kind of celebration where you learn about your woman teachings and doing the Berry Fast and all that but instead we did nothing at all we just learned how to use a pad and that is it.

This desire can be translated into a public acknowledgment although it is uncertain if she would have preferred it to include others outside of her family which would mean community involvement.

Elizabeth shared her need for private acknowledgment with her mother when she shared: "I always wanted my mom's affection and attention and all that girl stuff you know and I always hoped, hoped and hoped but it would not come". The private acknowledgment between women and membership into their circle can be quite powerful and leave a lasting impression on a young woman who has transitioned from a girl into a woman.



**Experience.** Rose Woman shares how she would have loved to have gone into seclusion like the old ways of how they did it when the young women were placed in “moon lodges”, female mentoring was provided, and the social prohibitions that accompany this rite of passage:

Okay I guess, like I was saying I did not do anything special for myself because my mother did not really tell me much but I think I explained that. I really did not do anything special but now if I was to go back to those years...I would have loved to have gone into like the old ways of how they did it. Taking the young girls out in their moon lodges that is how they called them and you know I would have liked to do that. .

The experience of separation within the first year of young Indigenous women comes in different forms. There is the initial physical separation of the young women from the opposite gender when they begin their first moontime. Following the physical separation, there is the separation of roles of the young women; they are to part with their younger self and transition into their new role as young women. How young women carry themselves and act within their rites of passage experience dictates how they will behave as traditional Indigenous women. The traditional grandmothers provide the young women with a more in-depth teaching of how to behave during this time and there are guidelines placed upon them to assist them in their transition. A few guidelines would be to not have intimate relationships with the opposite sex or same gender, no make-up or haircuts, and not to travel long-distances away from home. The reasoning behind the guidelines are to have women discover who they are without outside influences.

The physical separation of women having their own plates may be interpreted as understanding the powerfulness of their moontime, having respect for their power, and for others also. The young Indigenous women carry their plates with them during the first year, wash and dry them on their own after use, and ensure they are used at each meal. This yearlong activity

allows young Indigenous women to become comfortable and accustomed to the practice since it is one they are taught to continue through subsequent monthly moontime cycles.

Lightning Woman shares that she would have had an easier time to complete her Berry Fast if she were to do it when she was younger. She recognizes the ease of completing it due to the closeness of family proximity at the time:

... it would have been a lot easier when I was eleven years old to do it because I would have had that guidance from my family and from everybody else.

An interesting perspective which came across in this section, was the importance of family within the acknowledgement and experience themes. The acknowledgement these young Indigenous women who began their first moontime seek came from their family. The experience of a moontime celebration or rite of passage also includes the family through acknowledgement and also support. Family within many Indigenous homes include more than solely parents and sibling. Family may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and also traditional resource peoples such as Elders. All of these family members, some by blood, others by appointment, play a role within the Indigenous women's lives, before during and after their first moontime commences.

As the traditional Indigenous women told their stories, they had the ability to look back to what they would have wanted. This becomes more complex since the women presently are older and wiser, the young Indigenous women they once were may not have held the knowledge and wisdom they do now. Furthermore, would the young Indigenous women be as receptive to celebration and acknowledgement of their first moontime in the moment, or would they require lived experience and wisdom to fully embrace this traditional rite of passage?

**In the present, mind perspective.** As the women looked back at what they would have liked to have done, three themes emerged from this section. The three themes are wistfulness, understanding, and gratefulness.

***Wistfulness.*** Wistfulness can be viewed as a sense of longing or pensiveness with the addition of ability to look back from the present. The ability to look back with their present perspective allows for the theme wistfulness to appear. These women have lived experience, years when they have been able to gain knowledge and wisdom, and the thoughtfulness in which they answer the question. Some of the women are restoring their connection to their culture and traditions, as part of their healing journey. The answer to the question of what they would have liked to do for their first moontime should be taken into consideration for future generations.

Butterfly Rock Woman shares her wistful thinking as she thinks back to what she would have liked to do when she experienced her first moontime: “I wish I would have done my Berry Fast the very first day when I first started my period but you know I cannot be angry or upset about that”. She has the ability to look back on this, understand that she would have liked to complete her rite of passage, but also has the wisdom to know that she cannot hold regret since it is in the past. Butterfly Rock Woman was able to complete her rite of passage one year later which speaks to the maturity of this woman to realize its importance to her at such a young age.

When looking back at her missed opportunity to complete her Berry Fast, Lightning Woman wistfully recalls the event when she was able to complete her rite of passage when she began her first moontime, “Looking back that was such a missed opportunity. I had my chance to get it but I backed out because I guess I just chickened out”.

Rose Woman also shares her desire to receive moontime teachings which include resting during her moontime, and being mindful of her body and what it wants. There is also a teaching

of moontime where a woman is most creative during this time, so to explore that during her moontime, if possible. The idea is to turn inwards and be mindful of self, and rejuvenate as the body is going through a cleansing ceremony: “Now if I was to go back to those years and if my mother would have been more open with me...be able to just stay quiet and you know not do all kinds of activities during that time”.

As Butterfly Rock Woman, Lighting Woman, and Rose Woman look back at their first moontime and share what they would have liked to have done, the theme wistfulness is apparent. Although they look back and wish for something different, they have the wisdom and ability now to know they are unable to change the past and have come to terms with the past through their current reclamation or, for some of the women, continuation of their Indigenous traditional lifestyles.

***Understanding.*** Young girls blossoming into young women with the onset of their moontime begin the process of understanding they are now life givers, and the effect this new role may have on them. It can be viewed as a transition of sorts, an area of liminality which is a state of ambiguity for the young woman who is going through her rite of passage; this is when they are not a young girl anymore, and also not seen within the community as a woman yet. This usually occurs within the seclusion period of the rite of passage. Turner (1987) shares a similar view of transition; he describes it as a process, a becoming, and transformation (pp.4). There should be an understanding of their moontime, not solely from a physical perspective, but also their other aspects: mental, emotional and spiritual.

Charlie touches on the importance of understanding her moontime as a young woman and as she looked back to her own experience, she shares what she would have liked to have during her transition:

I think once you understand what is happening with your body you feel a little bit more empowered or in control and understand. I would have liked to have had all the information. If you don't understand then you feel more shameful and you don't understand it and kind of hide it but if you understand then you don't.

Through understanding what is happening with her physical body during her moontime and subsequent cycles, her emotional and mental aspects are also affected. She mentions if she would have had more information on what was happening with her physical body she would have felt more “empowered”, “in control”, and would understand the process of her moontime more holistically. It is interesting to note that the spiritual aspect is left out of Charlie's need to understand her moontime as a young woman.

Charlie also shares the idea of more education equalling less shame regarding her moontime. If she is able to fully understand it, more so from a holistic perspective, perhaps she would have been able to fully embody what it meant to be a young woman who is able to provide life. As life givers, there is a tremendous amount of responsibility involved and it is given to a young woman at a time in her life which is signified by her first moontime.

Moloney (2007) writes that emphasizing women's menstrual cycles on the physical to the exclusion of all the other dimensions produces a fragmenting effect in the psyche” (pp.154). The fragmentation of moontime education for young women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, may result in a disconnect between Body, Mind, and Spirit for them. If these aspects are not interrelated then the experience becomes off balance with the Body aspect receiving a lot of education, and the Mind and Spirit aspects essentially being ignored.

Inadequate premenstrual education can affect understanding of Indigenous women's first moontime. “The One That Flys Above” expresses how she recently “learned from a friend not too long ago who told me about berryfasting”, and states, “I would have done that if I knew that

back then”. Due to colonization and its devastating effects on many Indigenous peoples and communities, this rite of passage was considered illegal and was sent underground to be practiced in secret. The effects of turning a celebrated and positive event in a young woman’s life into something that was then secret or not even available to them, introduces the concept of shame.

Two other major contributing factors of shame were the religious groups who believed Indigenous ceremonies and traditions were not acceptable, and the introduction of residential schools for Indigenous children. According to the Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015):

Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were the major denominations involved in the administration of the residential school system. The government’s partnership with the churches remained in place until 1969, and, although most of the schools had closed by the 1980s, the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the late 1990s.

This would affect not only children, but whole families, communities and nations into believing the only way to achieve enlightenment or to live a good life was to convert to their religion. Furthermore, there was the residential school era of religious groups who taught generations of children in varying degrees. Some Indigenous children stayed for the school year and returned home during the summer, some children arrived at age four and remained until age sixteen, others attended day schools, while others arrived and never returned home due to illness, or possibly unknown death. Lafrance & Collins (2003) report that between the ages of three to age sixteen, the children were extracted from their homes, often forcibly, and placed in residential schools, where they remained from September until June each year. Unfortunately, some children did not return home” (pp.105).

Focusing on young Indigenous women experiencing their first moontime while at residential school, we have heard stories of shame based discipline with the teachers and administrators of many residential schools. Meadows, Thurston and Lagendyk (2004) who researched with traditional grandmothers in western Turtle Island, reports:

...the great harm and multigenerational effect on physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of children being torn from their families of origin was evident throughout the data. Some of the experiences [included] being forced to scrub floors with toothbrushes, having their knuckles scrubbed until they bled, and humiliated over natural processes as the onset of menarche (pp. 160).

Historically, Indigenous people used shaming as a corrective tool for community order; it was not used retributively, but more restoratively. When a person in the community committed a wrong, what occurred combined education and shaming into a restorative and educational opportunity. There is a distinction between shaming of a person and shaming of an act. Ross (1996) who has worked in the area of restorative justice in Indigenous communities for years, shares his perspective, “Great care was taken to shame the act itself, but not the offender as a person. Instead, offenders were shown that people in the community valued and respected them, despite their wrongdoing” (pp. 21).

If we transfer the historical thought processes of both moontime education and shame amongst Indigenous women, families, and communities, we can see the two do not intertwine. They are separate entities both with their own agendas: moontime education with celebration of a young woman becoming a life giver and embodying powerful medicine to shaming being associated with the education and reintegration of community members who step out of balance with the community. Unfortunately, with the introduction of residential schools and the impact of religious groups within Indigenous communities, the two separate entities: moontime and shame have been linked. Fortunately, there is a present traditional resurgence of separating the

two from an Indigenous traditional perspective focusing on cultural reclamation and the separation of shame from women's moontime.

***Gratefulness.*** Gratefulness can be shown and expressed in different ways, it can be shown through words, actions and thoughts. To show gratefulness through words one would give thanks to their benefactor, or tell of their appreciation, or speak highly of them. Showing gratefulness through actions can be construed by a handshake, hug, or doing something nice for the person you feel the gratitude towards which can also be seen as reciprocity. The third way gratefulness can be viewed or orchestrated would be through ones' own thoughts by perhaps, smiling when thinking of them or replaying what made one feel grateful.

The two women who participated in a rite of passage after they began their first moontime shared their gratefulness when looking back through appreciation of what their families have done for and with them. Although Lokoduq's father has passed onto the Spirit World and is no longer a physical part of her life, she looks back on his parental and cultural influence on her with gratefulness. Lokoduq shares: "My dad, how I wish I could face him and say thank you". As she speaks of her father, her gratefulness is shared with her words, her actions through smiling, and her thoughts by reminiscing about him and the positive impact he has had on her life.

Butterfly Rock Woman recalls her aunts, mother, and birth mother encouraging her to do her one year fast when she began her first moontime but she chose not to do it at that time. She decided to wait until her cousin began her moontime also and they completed their Berry Fast together. Butterfly Rock Woman says, "I am just grateful that I had the experience".

As these young women look back on their rites of passage experiences, they are able to feel gratefulness that they were able to partake in something so meaningful. As young women



during their first moontime they may have feelings of being overwhelmed and embarrassed with the transition into a woman. Young women will most likely have developing thoughts, feelings, and opinions about themselves, others, and society. As mentioned earlier in this section, young women may not fully understand the implication their moontime will have on their lives as they are physically ready to give life and begin the transition into young women, but emotionally and mentally they may not be there yet.

Moore (1995) completed mixed methods research with eighty-seven girls in grade six regarding attitudes to menstruation and notes that they were characterized by embarrassment, discomfort, and ambivalence growing up (pp. 102). Other themes which were emphasized were shame, anxiety, linked periods with incapacity or illness, and use of deception and denial as coping strategies. Knowing this, we can query how young Indigenous women can succeed in not permeating these attitudes and coping strategies towards their moontime if it seems to be part of society during or before their first moontime appears. Many young Indigenous women have these peer attitudes regarding moontime surround them via school, extra-curricular activities, and the media.

The query can then be further crystallized: How do we instill the belief that a rite of passage would hold as much profoundness for her as other Indigenous women who are in later stages of life who have the ability to look back on their lives and either wish they would have completed a rite of passage or be grateful they were able to? Lighting Woman reminisces about a chance to complete her Berry Fast but had backed out: “I am still planning on doing it at some point but I guess I’m just not quite there yet”.

On the other hand, McPherson and Korfine (2004) surveyed more than three hundred college age women and reported that the more positive a woman’s current menstrual

experiences, the more likely she was to have accurate knowledge about menstruation, to report positive health habits, and to be more satisfied with her physical appearance (pp.197).

Furthermore, poor preparation and negative menarcheal experiences may be linked to how a woman views her period for many years to come (pp.199). Although this is a retrospective study and the women involved were recalling events from the past, the data still serves a purpose by reminding us of the importance of young Indigenous women being able to have a positive moontime experience.

Additionally, there is importance in understanding that a women's moontime is not a sole event, it is a cyclical one which connects Indigenous women to life, water, and Mother Earth monthly for many years to come. Anderson (2011) remarks that women held physical and spiritual responsibilities for maintaining the life force of the community through their ability to give birth. Young Indigenous women were given responsibility at this time which focused on community life and cohesion. The responsibility of community life was given through their newly found physical ability to be life givers, and the cohesion aspect presents itself through these women being part of the women's circle now (belonging), and also understanding their role in society.

**In the present, spirit perspective.** As the traditional Indigenous women shared their stories and looked back at what they would have liked to have done, two themes emerged: experience and longing.

**Experience.** Out of the traditional Indigenous women who shared their story, one woman, Charlie, did not mention wanting to experience a rite of passage when she began her first moontime; although she did talk about wanting a more educated experience in order to feel

empowered as a woman. Furthermore, two women were able to participate in a rite of passage so their responses were different from the other women who were unable to experience one.

Butterfly Rock Woman shares that through her rite of passage experience, she had to “experience it to have that deeper belief and understanding of the spirit of medicine, and animals and myself.” In contrast, “The One That Flies Above” looked back at her first moontime and shared her desire to experience a rite of passage although at the time did not know it existed. “...you Berry Fast for just acknowledging that you are a woman and you fast for two days”. Elizabeth also wishes she would have been able to have her traditional teachings, which included her rite of passage. She shares: “I wish that I would have learned or been taught the traditional ways right because that is something I wanted to give my daughter you know”.

The absence of traditional Indigenous rites of passage for many women speak to the cultural disruption all Indigenous people on Turtle Island have experienced, either themselves or through past generations. Although there have been ways that rites of passage for many nations have been preserved, cultural disruption through colonization and the enforcement of past Indian Act policies attempted to extinguish them. Presently as we look at rites of passage for Indigenous nations on Turtle Island, many Indigenous people are at various stages of either traditional resurgence, assimilation, or a blending of the two. Some Indigenous peoples will see rites of passage for young women as an important part of traditional resurgence and effective cultural identity formation; others may view it as a distant memory not be practiced as it is archaic and not compatible with the modern world, while some are in between the two modes of thought.

Anderson (2000) discusses a specific rite of passage, the Berry Fast, and the relationship between and with Indigenous women in much of her work. She has also written about the end of

the Berry Fast ceremony which historically would signify that the young women were ready to take on the responsibilities of marriage and child rearing, but questions what it means for present-day young Indigenous women:

What does this mean to Aboriginal teens today, and how does it prepare them for what they are about to face? Aboriginal youth, like any youth, have to negotiate peer pressure, rebellion, the discovery of their sexuality, and a changing sense of their place and purpose in the community. Alcohol, drugs, and suicide are some of the struggles that we are faced with in our communities as part of the fallout of colonization (pp. 387).

Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) interviewed a traditional grandmother, Isabelle, who told them that she sees the value in transmitting these teachings in a modern context as restoring belonging, love for self, self-esteem, and connection to family. She further commented on how the teaching can address current issues that youth face such as bullying. She also addressed the importance of teaching the youth in a good way (pp. 174).

Through a rite of passage for young Indigenous women, this can instill a sense of who they are as they transition from girlhood to womanhood when they are wondering who they are as individuals and where they fit in society. The gathering of other women in order to help young women as they transition within the rite of passage would have a beneficial effect for them. With the gathering of women and the transfer of knowledge from older to younger, it can create a sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, in order to complete their rite of passage, the young women would need to complete an arduous task which can result in them feeling accomplished when complete and having a sense of self-worth. Anderson (2000) concludes:

...the Berry Fast offers strong teachings and a positive forum for us to pass on our strength and knowledge as Aboriginal women and to reclaim those understandings that can get lost or distorted when we become immersed in the ugly realities of colonized lives (pp. 393).

With the negative effects of colonization, this rite of passage can shift perspectives for young Indigenous women within a mainstream society. The shifting perspective back to their original Indigenous teachings can imbed a decolonizing and healing effect on them and can also saturate those around them. Parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, brothers, cousins, and friends will also be positively affected by this act of decolonization, which is a return to the original Indigenous teaching whilst living in a colonized society. It is about love for themselves, their families, communities, and nation when they participate in their respective rite of passage. It is a return to the original while understanding the changed landscape upon which they live; while also forecasting an interconnected and strong network upon which these rites of passage can flourish. Some believe that the basis of the teachings and rites should not be modernized to accommodate colonized perspectives while others view rites of passage as part of a continuum which means the act of modernization is seen as inevitable. There is an understanding that to journey to the decolonizing stage there must be a bridge between the two where those interested are able to access those who know about rites of passage ceremonies. It is not meant to divide but to offer a more decolonized approach to young Indigenous women as a viable option for them, as they transition to womanhood, that is accessible and in existence.

***Longing.*** The theme of longing was brought up within the stories shared by the traditional Indigenous women. The teachings themselves are important, but it was the desire to receive these teachings from other Indigenous women which stood out. Lightning Woman shares that she would have liked to learn the women teachings. An integral part of the teachings during this time is about the role of an Anishinaabe kwe (Indigenous woman) and what her responsibilities are which will serve her well as she finds her place in society as a woman. Bédard (2008) writes about bringing back the ceremonies of Berry Fasting for young Indigenous

girls because it is critical to restore the relationship and responsibility of women to Mother Earth as Keepers of the Water (pp. 98). Young Indigenous women longing for connection at such a pivotal transition in their life can find a strong cultural base through teachings which focus on the restoration of a relationship between their families and communities, including cultural responsibility. Bidaasa Kwe shares her thoughts as she looks back to her first moontime and the absence of traditional teachings:

I think the teaching behind it is very critical for a young woman to understand what that is at that time. I know when I have heard the moontime, the teachings, the stories behind it, I wish my mom took the time out for me to go for that but back then I would not have known anybody.

An important reminder is brought forward with Bidaasa Kwe's thoughts about her first moontime; we need to remember the amount of cultural resources available to each young woman. She shares she would have liked to receive these teachings but on the other hand, she would not have known any resource available to her in order to receive them. Whitecloud Woman surmises if she was able to receive these teachings she would have been able to spiritually connect with other women and understand her role as an Anishinaabe kwe:

Like this is you becoming a woman and you are able to give life now and that kind of thing. Yeah, just to have some recognition would have been nice because it is a big thing. It is a big thing in a young girl's life.

As young women, this would be a critical time for them to be grounded in traditional teachings about the roles and responsibilities they have as life givers and keepers of the water. Some young women want to experience and live everything immediately; the idea of waiting and being patient is not always at the forefront for them. Also, some young women are looking for who they are as individuals in today's society; they want to know who they truly are and are at an age where they are able to seek it out on their own. These teachings and the acting out of the rite of passage itself can help them learn self-discipline, responsibility, patience, and who they

are as individuals in today's society. The women who shared their stories expressed a sense of longing during this time to connect to others, understand and receive teachings about their roles and responsibilities of Anishinaabe kweg. Looking back on their first moontime the women were able to articulate a sense of longing during that time, as if something was missing but at the time they may have been unsure what it was.

The teachings and stories which are provided by these traditional Indigenous women are helpful for the next generation of women who begin their first moontime. The lived experiences of these women can help the next generation by offering them the importance of completing their rite of passage as it will help them understand who they are as Anishinaabe kweg, including their roles and responsibilities. This would seem like an opportune time for them to understand this at a time in their lives which may include feelings of anomie if they do not receive women's teachings about their moontime. According to Antone, Miller, & Myers (1986), anomie "denotes a people's loss of faith and belief in their own institutions, values, and existence...best describes the state of indigenous existence in the western world during times of real powerlessness and hopelessness (pp. 14).

Within the Present section, the traditional Indigenous women shared from each perspective what they did or what they would have liked to do from a holistic perspective. From the Body perspective, the themes acknowledgment, and experience were highlighted; from the Mind perspective were wistfulness, understanding, and gratefulness. Lastly, the Spirit perspective was shared and brought forth the themes: experience and longing.

We will now shift to the last section which is looking ahead to the future generations of Indigenous women and girls. Firstly, I will share my story as I look back at my first moontime

and answer the same question as the Indigenous women: What would you like to see for girls in your community for their first moontime?

### **Looking Ahead**

I would like young Indigenous women to have the option of completing their rites of passage when they have their first moontime. The rites of passage may vary from nation to nation, but the idea behind it remains the same: to honour them as sacred beings who are able to give life. This positive messaging during this new stage in their life can assist with strengthening their cultural identity and provide a stable base for them to live a good life. The option of completing their first moontime should be accompanied by guidance and available cultural resources if they choose this path. The lack of guidance and support for young Indigenous women going through their rites of passage may have a negative impact due to the lack of support and possible feelings of anomie the young women may feel.

For future generations of Indigenous women, I would like to see the strength within them have the opportunity to shine without having to hide it due to the effects of colonization. I want them to be able to walk down the street without having to worry whether they will become one of the many missing and/or murdered Indigenous women. I would like to see future generations of Indigenous women continue to achieve success within the mainstream world through careers and education, but also thrive through their traditional and cultural history through teachings, ceremonies, and their rites of passage. Many Indigenous women take on the dual role of life giver and provider without a second thought; they continue to exude resilience and exemplify positive characteristics for generations to come and those who are still with us.

I want future generations of young Indigenous women to continue on the path of being fearless, strong role models for their children, nieces, cousins, et cetera. I want the cycle of



young Indigenous women who feel the effects of intergenerational trauma to use their Creator-given gifts to heal while also living successfully in mainstream society, if they choose. Their Creator-given gifts include the Life Stages teachings<sup>3</sup>, seven Grandfather/Grandmother teachings<sup>4</sup>, Medicine Wheel<sup>5</sup> teachings, the gift of being keepers of the land, and many other important gifts which are too many to name. These gifts will vary from nation to nation, tribe to tribe, family to family; the way one nation, tribe, or family is not wrong because another chooses to use the gifts in a different way. As long as the gifts honour the Creator, then it cannot be wrong.

I see the benefits of rites of passages through my daughter who is now a twenty-one-year-old young Algonquin woman who is strong and independent. She is currently in university and has maintained a strong relationship with her traditional grandmother and aunties. As she begins her transition from the Wondering/Wandering Life to the Truth Stage in life, she is distancing herself from us, her parents, and finding out who she is on her own. I believe she is ready to find who she is as her own person since she has matured over the years and through her rite of passage. Now that she is transitioning to be her own person, at twenty-one years old, she is able to understand the repercussions and also benefits of her actions. I see the benefits of rites of passage for her and there are certain characteristics she embodies that she is able to use throughout life in order to be successful, both in her personal life and career.

The traditional Indigenous women who shared what they would like for future generations had the lived experience of a young girl who experienced her first moontime.

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<sup>3</sup> Seven Stages of Life is a trajectory model of how one lives through various stages with the ideal that they strive to live in balance and achieve mino bimaadiziwin.

<sup>4</sup> Seven Grandfather/Grandmother Teachings is a set of teachings which guide Indigenous people towards balance and mino bimaadiziwin. The teachings are Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Truth, Courage, and Humility.

<sup>5</sup> The Medicine Wheel is an Indigenous symbol used to express many different thoughts and ideas that may better be viewed as cyclical or in quadrants.

Although each women's path was different, they all experienced their first moontime and were able to use that knowledge and wisdom while moving through several life stages. The wisdom of these women as they look forward to the next generation and what they would like to see for them is embedded in the cultural teaching of seven generations which speaks of looking seven generations ahead and seven generations behind. Borrows (2008) discusses the seventh generation which is upon us and holds special significance for Indigenous people. Decisions about the future are not supposed to occur without taking them into account. Furthermore, Borrows (2008) shares that he also looks for guidance in the other direction, seven generations back. Sinclair (2004) discusses her concept of seven generations as an interconnected part of a kinship web:

The kinship web extends to all human relations, both living and unborn. The responsibility of the living is to care for and honour the suffering, memory, and spiritual well-being of those who have passed away, as well as to pray for the lives of (and to act as caretakers of the earth) for seven generations to come (pp. 54, 55).

Indigenous women are a vital part of the kinship web as they are life givers but understand that without men that would not be possible, so the balance is evident. According to Borrows' (2008) seventh generation explanation, Indigenous women should be aware that the seventh generation is upon us and in order to obtain guidance and wisdom, they should be looking seven generations behind. As we look back, and reflect on Sinclair's (2004) kinship web which extends to include both born and unborn, we also have the responsibility of the living to care for and honour those who have passed on, but also to pray for the lives of the seven generations to come. The seventh-generation teaching can be applied for time immemorial since where we individually situate ourselves is where the marker is for the seven generations ahead and the wisdom of seven generations which have passed by. The placement of the seventh-

generation marker is not the highlight of the teaching, the focus should remain on gathering of wisdom from the seven generations who have passed by, to use in a good way keeping in mind the seven generations to come.

As the women who were involved with this research share their stories, they have the ability to look back seven generations and engender the wisdom of past mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and female cousins to utilize for the betterment of the next seven generations to come. The next seven generations to come within Indigenous women's kinship webs are tangible; they are felt daily as they interact with their female family members, such as daughters, grand-daughters, nieces, and female cousins. Within Indigenous communities, family is not seen as a nuclear system with parents and children as one entity; families are seen as ever evolving and changing, accepting and adopting new people in as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and siblings. This does not further complicate the kinship web; it further enriches it with more wisdom and lived experiences for the next seven generations to utilize and benefit from.

The final results section is from the Indigenous women's perspectives of what they would like to see for Indigenous girls in their community for their first moon time. These results are shared through a holistic perspective: Body, Mind, and Spirit.

**Looking ahead, body perspective.** From a Body perspective, the women discussed the importance of delivery mechanisms for moon time education, the significance of women gathering, and subsequent building of an informal support system for each other.

**Delivery mechanism.** Historically, in Indigenous communities, knowledge was transferred to others for survival and cementing of traditional roles of men and women which assisted with harmonious community living. Older women shared their community roles for

younger females through actions, story telling, and games. The storytelling was an important vehicle for knowledge sharing. The stories told assisted the community members with the knowledge to carry out their roles, understand the guidelines to live by, and also continue embracing the importance of oral tradition. These roles ensured the literal survival of the community. As years progressed, roles shifted due to colonization although women's inherent responsibilities of life-giving did not change. Through colonization, Indigenous women's perceived identities through the residential school and the enfranchisement process era were eroding, although never completely disappeared. The role of oral tradition through story telling in residential schools were not seen as priority; the written word took precedence during that era. The residential school era spanned generations and throughout the importance of oral tradition may seem to have been lost, although it was not. Presently, some Indigenous women have held on to or relearned their culture which includes the traditional rites of passage and want to pass it on to future generations. This type of knowledge sharing involves story telling to ensure the survival of rites of passage, as does this thesis. Times have significantly changed since colonization began on Turtle Island; we live in a world with many different and vibrant cultures, and ever-changing technology with the flow of information being almost instantaneous. There are many different ways to deliver knowledge to and with young Indigenous females.

Rose Woman shares that moontime teachings should be taught by Elders within schools so they would be able to value themselves in a good way:

Well it would be really good if their Elders would be able to go and share these teachings to young girls, even starting at the age of 10, 11 or 12. A lot of times, young girls nowadays start around 10ish, 11 years old and I think these are very important teachings for young woman on how to take care of themselves and this would really help them learn how sacred that gift of the moontime is. There probably would not be as many teenage pregnancies you know if these teachings are brought to the schools and they would value themselves in a good way.

The implementation of this type of education within schools sounds like a promising avenue to explore. In general, children attend school from age 6 until high school, unless they are homeschooled. There has been a shift within the schools in the last couple of decades with the implementation of Indigenous teachings and contemporary content within classes, including traditional resource people and Elders. This delivery mechanism could prove to be effective as they are a captive audience and could be incorporated into the existing sexual health curriculum. Although the sexual health curriculum may not be limited to solely moontime teachings, it can be part of a culturally balanced approach to menstruation education.

***Women gathering.*** In the context of traditional Indigenous women gathering, there are specific ceremonies which they perform and participate in as part of their role, and also for holistic support. Indigenous women's ceremonies may include full moon ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, circles, and cedar baths to name a few. An informal gathering of Indigenous women, more specifically older women, will gather and discuss their lives with each other or plan for the next ceremony they will be having. Living within a mainstream society, there are other reasons why traditional Indigenous women gather, but the focus will remain on the traditional aspect.

Whitecloud Woman shares she would like to have women gather together and share their teachings with young women who are having their first moontime and also stresses the importance of the presence of grandmothers:

I think that it would be really good to have the woman gather, the grandmother come. Just to share about what they want to share about with the young girl, well you know just things like you know why you can't attend certain ceremonies, you know in regards handling your sacred items stuff like that. I myself have not been given teachings about it by a woman by a grandmother so I will handle my drum but I will not touch my medicines and stuff. Yeah, I think it is important for young girls to ...you know because they are so busy with their iPods, iPhones and all that to put that stuff away for especially for such a significant time of your life to have some recognition, have a feast for them

and to sit and listen to the Elders even if it is not regarding moontime, just because kids don't listen to adults as much as they should.

This can be looked upon as the introduction of moontime teachings to young girls and their respective roles and responsibilities as an informed segue in the life of young Indigenous women. When a young girl before her first moontime is informed by older female relations about what is expected of her as a young woman, she can ease into the role instead of it being thrust upon her at her first moontime. The idea of constant immersion of moontime teachings and their roles by traditional Indigenous women for young Indigenous girls during women gatherings would be an opportune time to transfer cultural knowledge between women. In keeping with the idea of preparation, Rose Woman believes young girls should be able to experience the Full Moon ceremony:

Also, the last thing I would like to add is even young girls, even it is before their moontime, if they could even experience the full moon ceremony. A lot of times grandmothers teach in that ceremony of how important it is to be a young woman and to share teachings of the full moon and how its relationship is, it is seen as Nokomis and so the young girls would know about the universal life, why we call Grandmother Moon Nokomis you know and so forth. So, it is a very good ceremony.

During the Full Moon ceremony, Grandmothers teach how important it is to be a young woman and will share teachings of the full moon and its relationship to the young girls.

One caveat to this excellent suggestion is that normally within women's circles and ceremonies, a young girl would not be invited until her first moontime is upon her. This requirement may be seen as a limit for young girls who have not started their moontime to be invited to these ceremonies and circles. The requirement of young women having their moontime can be seen as a limitation but it can also be seen as an important part of their rite of passage. As these young women transition into womanhood they are accepted into a circle of other Indigenous women which is a defined marker within their rites of passage. Although the young

girls would not be able to participate within the ceremonies and circles, there would be other opportunities for them to be the recipients of cultural knowledge. As Whitecloud Woman stressed the importance of grandmothers being present with young girls when they learn about their moontime, this can be seen as an informal framework for knowledge transfer also. Young girls can participate in the informal women gatherings where they may have the opportunity to learn about their upcoming role as Indigenous women through story telling, listening to teachings, and also role-modeling.

As young girls are taught about their moontime, Lightning Woman would like to see it celebrated:

I would like to see it celebrated for what it is, that sacred powerful time and I would like everyone to learn about their Berry Fast if they are Anishinabek because I know the different tribes do different things but for us we do Berry Fast and that would be what I would like to see most. To learn those teachings about being a woman and have it celebrated instead of hidden.

When moontime is celebrated as a positive marker in a young women's life, it can have a strong impact on her with emphasis placed on traditional roles and responsibilities which can furthermore strengthen her cultural and traditional base. Although the focus is on all Indigenous women and their rites of passage, Lightning Woman is aware that different tribes do different things but shares that Anishinabek women do their Berry Fast and that is what she would like to see.

***Support group.*** Informal women gatherings were highlighted as a legitimate form of cultural knowledge transfer. Another central component following the transfer of knowledge is ongoing traditional support. Young women will require ongoing support before, during, and after their rite of passage as it is not a lone marker in their life but a part of their everyday life. This type of rite of passage embraces inclusion with other women as a solidifying factor within

their roles as Indigenous women; it is not separate from their everyday life within mainstream society, it is a significant part of their holistic selves. From a resource perspective, Butterfly Rock Woman who completed her rite of passage will support her daughter and friends and encourage them to complete theirs.

My daughter is 10 years old and I already see her body changing so I'm preparing her you know. So, since she was 6 years old I started telling her a little bit about my experience with the Berry Fast, teaching her a little about it. So, I'm planting that in her head because I'm preparing her to do that ... my daughter she does not have a choice in this because I know the benefits of doing your Berry Fast and it helped me to become what I am today so today my daughter knows even though she does not have a choice, she does have a choice and she is open to doing her Berry Fast so it took you know some time of planting that seed... So, as a mother, I am going to support my daughter but not only my daughter but like she has friends you know and so you know I see my daughter being support to people or encourage other woman to do their Berry Fast.

She also believes we should develop a friendship and support group to help other girls in the community and encourage them by sharing the women teachings including their roles and responsibilities.

I think of the importance because of their first moon time, so for me I did not do it right away and that is okay but because I did not know then but today I could encourage people to do it right away when their first moon time because that is when their first berry, powerful is that first year so I am preparing my daughter to do that. Giving her those teachings to be a woman and those roles and those responsibilities and you know so for other girls in the community we can develop a friendship and support group to help other people and encourage them to do it.

Butterfly Rock Woman has lived experience of the benefit of her rite of passage, is preparing her daughter for hers, and has the larger perspective of the future community in mind. Her concept of a friendship and support group to facilitate cultural knowledge transfer for young girls in her community is an exceptional proposal. She would like to see young Indigenous girls not only experience their rite of passage upon their first moontime; she would like to see them supported before, during and after as part of a lifelong connection with other Indigenous women. Butterfly Rock Woman understands that this specific rite of passage connects women together



and would like to see young girls wrapped in their traditional teachings and roles as they turn into young women.

This type of friendship and support group can help those who are interested and are knowledgeable of some teachings, but are unsure of where to go and who to ask for more information. This type of support can help future young Indigenous women prepare, but it can also assist the mothers, aunties, and other females reclaim their traditions and roles for future generations. With the traditional reclamation of their roles within this specific rite of passage, these mothers, aunties and female relative will be able to pass on their knowledge to others. With stronger ties to their traditional knowledge and who they are as Anishinaabe kweg, this can be part of the impetus for an increasingly stronger, culturally stable generation to come. The support group is a promising avenue as we look forward to future generation of young Indigenous girls.

**Looking ahead, mind perspective.** As these women looked ahead to future generations, they discussed themes related to the Mind perspective. These themes include pre-moontime preparation, knowledge transfer, and self respect. These areas will explore concepts relating to the preparation of young Indigenous women before and during their first moontime, the intricacies of intergenerational knowledge transfer, and also self-respect and what that means for future generations. Although these themes seem to repeat themselves, there is an interrelatedness impression of certain themes, although seen through the Body, Mind, and Spirit lenses.

***Pre-moontime preparation by women, grandmothers, Elders.*** “The One That Flys Above” shares that during her adolescence years she was not able to prepare for her rite of passage after her first moontime because there was no one to teach her. With no one to teach her,

the importance of preparation before, during, and after by women, grandmothers and Elders would have been beneficial for her. In the spirit of resilience and traditional reclamation, she will be teaching her grandson about the ceremonies she attends today and is patiently waiting for her children to follow in her footsteps. She shares: “Today that [berryfasting] is what I want to teach my grandkids if I ever have a girl. That is what I want to teach her”.

Charlie shares that future generations of young women should have information about their first moontime so that they know beforehand if they would like to complete their Berry Fast or not.

I think it would just be interesting to have the information so that they know beforehand because I remember when we did a young girls’ retreat, there was a girl going through her moontime and I was learning how about she was prepping. She had sponsors and she was making moccasins and getting teachings and learning. She was growing her hair, she was getting ready for her feast and she had some roles and I did not know about any of those things and I kind of wish I would have...

This pre-emptive approach allows the young girls to absorb what is expected of them as they proceed towards their first moontime. The young girls would be provided with the information for their rite of passage long before they are expected to perform them, and also have role models who have been through them or advocate for them as an important cultural rite.

Historically, young Indigenous children would role-play what older community members were doing. Young girls would role-play working in the camp and take care of their ‘babies’ which were dolls which they would see their older female community members doing. Community living, before colonization and prior to industrialization, was about survival so their roles were clear. Women were the life givers, caretakers of children, and leaders within the area of ensuring their camps ran smoothly. Men had an important role within the community also and they worked together in tandem to maintain the survival of their people. As the young girls increased in age, so did their responsibilities within the community.

For example, Lokoduq grew up with her father in a remote northern community. She stayed home from school from ages nine to twelve. While staying home, she learned many skills, such as how to take care of the home and prepare food brought home by her father. She recalls:

I learned how to cut animals, cut meat, fish, pluck feathers...I would sit there plucking like there is piles of duck and geese and other birds that we would pluck by hand, take the outer feathers off and then get down after.

She remembers sitting, plucking feathers, and crying because she thought her father would feel sorry for her. Lokoduq's father looked at her and told her that she had to do it because nobody else will. This example highlights how as she became older, her role within the family changed and she had to take on more responsibility even though she did not necessarily enjoy it. Lokodug further shared that she did have help occasionally from her step-mother or other female relatives. For the most part, young women were eased into their roles with the support and assistance of the women within the community.

There is a marked difference between the historical gender roles and the contemporary notion of non-gender biased roles in society today. Historically, the roles were defined in order for the communities to survive as mentioned earlier in chapter one. Hammersmith (2010) states that emphasis was placed on kinship, and the interdependency of female and male roles which was crucial for survival (pp. 125). In general, the roles assisted the community in defining what needed to be done, by whom, and also for what purpose. Within the modern world today, roles such as these may not seem as important within the mainstream population, and may be viewed as counterproductive. Some of the roles which may seem counter-productive are the women as carers of children, and the men as providers. As the world changes, so do Indigenous people, which speaks to their resilience. Women are now providing for their families, and men can also

have the dual role of carer and provider which are examples of specific roles which have changed within the contemporary setting. The roles that are discussed within this thesis, are the ones that cannot be changed. Women are life givers of future generations; their bodies are biologically driven to have their moontime (for the most part). There are exceptions to the biological role, such as health related issues and menopause, but moontime is a reality for the Indigenous women within this thesis. These Indigenous women have roles that they participate in that they pass on to the next generation.

Young girls growing up should see their mother or older female relatives experience moontime-related activities so it becomes the norm, not a taboo subject. Moontime-related activities may include mainstream ones such as the purchasing of feminine hygiene products or a simple announcement of being on their moontime in order to normalize it. More traditional Indigenous moontime-related activities may include limited attendance or participation at traditional Indigenous ceremonies, unwillingness to handle sacred objects such as drums, traditional medicines, or not sleeping within the same bed as their partners. During her moontime, Lightning Woman shares there is no sex during this time, she does not sleep in the same bed with her partner, and she cannot cook for him. She learned the reason is because her moontime is so powerful and the men cannot handle it:

...if we sleep in the same bed, or have sex or do any of that then our power sucks out their energy and they get tired and weak and that is my teachings behind it, that is why we stay away a bit because we were too powerful for them to handle.

If these moontime-related activities are normalized around young girls it will be easier for them to expect their first moontime and understand a bit of its complexities and strengths. Jarrah & Kamel (2012) remark that young females who did not prepare for their menstruation before their first menstruation experience stems from the consideration of menstruation as taboo;

also, society looked at them as if they were too young and under age to pay their attention to such sensitive topics. Furthermore, they postulate that poor attitude toward menstruation and low menstrual practices were significantly associated with inadequate premenstrual preparation.

Inadequate premenstrual education is evident in some Indigenous families, although not all. We should keep in mind the effects of cultural disruption and acceptance of mainstream views regarding women's moontime will have an impact on the perceived importance or knowledge of traditional rites of passage at this time. On the other hand, there are many Indigenous mothers who were raised in similar lifestyles and have reclaimed their cultural traditions which are being passed down to the next generation. One cultural tradition that may be passed down during a young Indigenous woman's first moontime is their rite of passage.

If a young woman has cultural expectations placed upon them before their first moontime is upon them, they will have a better chance of understanding what is taking place. If Jarrah & Kamel (2012) propose that poor attitude toward menstruation and low menstrual practices were significantly associated with inadequate premenstrual preparation, then the opposite could be true; adequate premenstrual education would improve attitudes toward menstruation and improve menstrual practices. Rose Woman shared with her own daughters what she learned throughout the years when regaining her culture but not what was learned from her mother who attended residential school. Rose Woman shared teachings with her daughters before they began their first moontime:

I instructed my daughters when they were young, when they had their first moon cycle, to use a special plate, special utensil and cup and they would use this during their moontime and they would put them away and then again, the following month use that same plate.

In order for Indigenous women and families to reclaim their traditions and culture, many are searching and finding it through traditional resource people, and/or Elders. Returning to

ones' culture and traditions can be an arduous, but also a healing journey and part of this is to pass it on to future generations. There are different ways that the knowledge transfer can be completed; it can be done informally through aunties, sisters, and traditional grandmothers, or more formal structures such as schools which is discussed in the next section.

***Knowledge transfer.*** Intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer is important for many traditional Indigenous women. The concept of intergenerational knowledge transfer is something which Lokoduq can identify with as she shares the rite of passage ceremony she performed with her granddaughter:

So, I do not know if I am running up too far ahead but I did the same thing for my granddaughter. I could not do it for my daughters because I was still not going back practicing my culture yet, too busy raising children but once I got my grandchildren and I started going back to my traditions I tried to follow them with my children just like my dad did for me and it is good that with my granddaughter she will have that memory later on.

Elizabeth concisely summarizes the importance of learning about her culture and the desire to pass it on to her daughter: "The meaning that comes with our culture it's so profound, the stories, it's crazy". According to Wabie (2011), from Grandmothers to mothers to young women to girls, the knowledge transfer is occurring at varying speeds, breadth, and avenues. There is no common vehicle to transfer this knowledge evenly to all young Indigenous girls, but there are several strong Anishinaabe kweg who understand the need to pass on these teachings. This can speak to the need for a flexible delivery mechanism whose framework may be usable for different families, tribes, and nations who live on Mother Earth. There can be certain components of a flexible delivery mechanism which can be utilized for the flow of cultural knowledge between generations, for the future. As we begin to braid the women's stories together we may see a clear framework which a flexible delivery mechanism can be built upon. Components we see so far include: culturally informed, older Anishinaabe kweg, younger

generations of Indigenous women, idea of support, avenues of cultural knowledge transfer, and women gatherings.

Knowledge transfer can occur when there are two distinct type of groups: one to give the knowledge and one to receive. This is a very simplistic explanation of knowledge transfer, as it can be quite intricate when certain variables are included. According to Wabie (2011), when the girls become young women, the Grandmother puts them on their Berry Fast with the help of the mothers. The young women know about the Berry Fast through their mother, aunts, cousins, friends already because they have gone through them or know someone who has. Each young woman has her own part in the traditional knowledge transfer cycle. It is then up to the young woman to share this experience with others, because of the traditional resurgence that has begun. Therefore, if the young women have the necessary supports and resources available to them, then this basic knowledge transfer framework will most likely be sufficient.

If other variables such as lack of support and resources are added, then the traditional knowledge transfer cycle will not work as easily. If one area of a knowledge transfer cycle is not balanced with the others, then the cycle will not work as intended. Moreover, if there is a lack of support and resources available to the young women before their first moontime, the teachings which accompany the importance of completing their rite of passage also become an important variable. The young women may not understand the importance of completing their rite of passage when they have their first moontime, since it was never seen or taught as significant. Other variables include the possibility of the young women being in the care of Children's Aid Societies who may not understand or have the ability to organize a rite of passage with and for the young women and their respective families. As part of their culturally competent care, the children who are in care should have access to traditional resource people, Elders, and/or positive

family members who can assist them with this rite of passage. The mechanisms can be put into place within a formal and informal system although each young woman, her family, community, and supports will all be different that allows the flexibility for the knowledge transfer to occur.

The intricacies which may or may not accompany an intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer opens up an area for opportunities to be created with, for, and by traditional Indigenous women themselves and external institutional systems. There may be opportunities for intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer to occur within the education, child welfare, and also legal system. As mentioned previously, Rose Woman shared that she would like to see Elders providing teachings within the schools which would be an opportune avenue for knowledge transfer. An important part of this type of knowledge transfer is that it would be for all students, not solely Indigenous students. This may also open up an understanding and appreciation of cultural knowledge for all students.

Unfortunately, there are some Indigenous children who are involved within the child welfare system, so inclusion of Elders and traditional resource people providing teachings to the children and also workers, foster parents, and volunteers within the child welfare system would be advantageous. This type of knowledge transfer would be beneficial to elicit understanding and appreciation of Indigenous teachings and traditions. Furthermore, for the Indigenous women who are incarcerated or in conflict with the law, this may also be an chance for them to receive these teachings, and also for the officers, jail employees, and court-related stuff such as judges and lawyers to understand and appreciate Indigenous traditions and teachings also. This type of knowledge transfer would not focus solely on the young Indigenous girls and women but also older women since they are all part of a larger, extended family system which they will return to.



Although, there has been a focus on the transfer of knowledge within formal systems, this does not replace or diminish the importance of informal systems. Informal systems such as women gathering to plan ceremonies and circles, to support each other through parenthood, to talk with each other about their everyday lives, and also to celebrate important milestones such as births, naming ceremonies, weddings, and also the inclusion of rites of passage for young Indigenous women starting their moontime. There is camaraderie, inclusion, support, and the future of Indigenous women in mind when women gather.

***Self-respect.*** Respect for oneself is a trait which is grown within young women; some young women have experiences where their self-respect is able to flourish and grow. Other young Indigenous women have and lived through negative experiences which attempted to dampen their self-respect. This is not to say that respect can be extinguished through negative life experiences such as domestic violence, addictions, loss of family, etc. It can be dampened though and not tended to which in turn can dim the importance of self-respect. Lokoduq believes women have the bigger responsibility and explains her thoughts:

They have the bigger responsibility because they carry children and they are the first ones to teach the children what to do, find ways of coping with stress, coping with loneliness, coping with insecurity. If I could put self respect into the girls, that's, I am glad for that but they also need self pride, self worth. If they could get self respect I think that's what begins to build them up.

Strong Indigenous women will not allow injustices to occur with them and their families when they have strong self-respect for themselves. With respect for themselves, they will treat themselves and each other in a kinder fashion, which can have an interconnected effect on their families, communities, and nations. Furthermore, when we view Indigenous women as self-respecting individuals with intrinsic worth, their perceptions of themselves can also change. It is very much an interconnected and mirrored approach to the concept of others instilling self-

respect within Indigenous women which they themselves would feel, believe, and act in accordance.

Bidaasa Kwe wants young Indigenous women to grow up respecting themselves, especially knowing who they are and what they want. She believes the Berry Fast can help them learn restraint and resistance also. She believes the lesson of not being able to eat berries for one year is an important lesson in resistance and restraint which can “help them not give into peer pressure and stuff like that”. When young women participate in their respective rite of passage, they are taking a step back and finding out who they really are as individuals from a holistic stance. As they are intrinsically experiencing this malleable time in their life, they are being immersed in experiences which teach them patience, self-respect, and the importance of their role within a community and nation setting. Bidaasa Kwe has been encouraging her friends with their daughters to do the Berry Fast and shares her reasoning: “I know some girls who did and their life is completely different. They are still engaged in their culture, our culture. I see they have grown up very different from us and I can see their strength in them”.

As I previously mentioned, Lokoduq shared she would like self-respect, pride, and worth for young Indigenous women because that is what she believes builds them up. Her perspective of how some young women achieve self-respect, or other gifts is thought-provoking:

What I usually talk about, talk about in depth of walking with my gifts and for a young person to realize that they have no gifts yet and to tell them that they have to suffer a long time in order to achieve those gifts. I don't know, do you tell them that or do you say 'you are going to have a painful life and just remember it is a gift' because if somebody told me I was going to suffer for two years, I would not want to move, I would not want to go because knowing that I was going to suffer...you need to embrace, shine up your negative, they call that transmuting the poison. I don't know if you have ever read the book by Jamie Sams but she talks about that too. She talks about transmuting. You take a poison, alcoholism and turn it around and make it a trophy, just like the armies have medals...I would have gifts that I could show right here and to tell the young people that that is the only way you are going to have medals, our medals.

The perspective of having to go through trauma in order for the energy to be transmuted into positivity is worth noting. Similar to a body builder who is building muscle and stamina, self-respect and resilience can shine through when young Indigenous women experience a life event which works out their ‘muscle’ or self-respect trait. Some young Indigenous women may find themselves in a situation where their self-respect is tested, through no fault of their own. This is when they are able to recognize, and utilize this trait. Unfortunately, some young Indigenous women’s self-respect trait or ‘muscle’ is not utilized. There are many reasons why certain Indigenous women exercise self-respect, while others do not; this may include upbringing, societal messaging of women, and current relationships. Within Indigenous women’s teachings, there is self-respect, pride and worth built into the teachings, ceremonies and traditions. These teachings, including moontime teachings, are vital for the transmission of the aforementioned characteristic traits.

**Looking ahead, spirit perspective.** Within the section, Looking Ahead, the traditional Indigenous women shared what they would like young women to embody from a spiritual perspective. The themes which were identified and will be discussed are: sacredness of womanhood, and ceremonies.

***Sacredness of womanhood.*** The term sacred within the context of womanhood can be defined as reverence or admiration for women and the roles, responsibilities, and traits they exemplify. Within Indigenous women’s roles and responsibilities, they also have the extended accountability of living within mainstream society and ensuring that role is also met. Roles within mainstream society may consist of securing employment, and providing for their children sometimes with or without a partner. Indigenous women’s roles and responsibilities also including being life givers and caretakers for future generations and also keepers of the water.

These important traditional roles allow the culmination of the sacredness of womanhood as they are seen as vessels for the next generation, responsible for the water on Mother Earth while maintaining a living within mainstream society in order to function as part of their community. As part of their responsibilities of keepers of the water, they have a responsibility to pass on their teachings to the next generation, including those relating to their moontime.

Rose Woman knows moontime is a special gift which is bestowed on Anishinaabe kweg, and all women, and is a natural cycle they all go through. She also believes it is important to share this and make youth aware that it is a special time and young women are at their most powerful time of the month during their moontime:

It is a time for a woman, a young woman to nurture themselves...during that time you are to stay quiet, get to know your body as it goes through the changes and again reminding the young girls that they are very powerful at that time.

There is importance in young Indigenous women knowing the sacredness of their womanhood, which can be linked to increasing their self-respect. Young Indigenous women should know that their moontime is a special time, the power they represent, and also the importance of self-nurturing during this time. Within a mainstream and fast-paced world which is controlled by time and deadlines, the idea of Indigenous women embracing, understanding and experiencing the sacredness and nurturing side of their moontime on a monthly basis may have positive effects. It is akin to the interrelated concept of self-care; women caring for themselves in a holistic fashion while taking time out for themselves to renew and recharge will have a positive impact on themselves, their families, communities and nations.

When asked about what Lightning Woman would like to see for future generations of Indigenous women, she says she would like everyone to learn about their Berry Fast. She would also like to see young women's moontime celebrated for what it is which is a sacred and

powerful time. The idea of the sacredness of womanhood does not stop at solely Indigenous women; it is a combined effort with men also. As young Indigenous women learn and embrace their sacredness this may take some time away from their daily responsibilities and roles within their lives. There needs to be a balance between the two genders or partners, an understanding that women are sacred and require their monthly moontime to renew and recharge. An example which Lightning Woman provided relates to her partner who is also Anishinabek:

He said something that was the nicest thing that a man ever said to me on my moontime. It was a few days in and I was just exhausted, lethargic, I was falling asleep on the couch and he asked 'what's wrong?' and I said 'I'm tired, I have been bleeding for four days' and he was like 'oh, if I was bleeding for four days, I would be in the exact same place you are' and yeah that was the nicest thing a man has ever said about it, that kind of empathy.

Keeping on the topic of sacredness of womanhood, Charlie would like to have these teachings given to future Indigenous women so they understand how powerful they are when they are on their moontime and moontime etiquette:

I'm not an expert by any means but at least give some of those teachings and some of those learnings that I have learnt to be able to share or connect with my daughter, my nieces or whatever or with appropriate people to give these teachings so they understand how powerful we are when we are on our moontime and some of the things we should be doing and not be doing. I find with everyone I have met especially in Sudbury it is not just "oh you can't touch that because you are on your moon and I am like why? I am just inquisitive and why can't I do that and they are never shy to say "this is why you cannot".

There is moontime etiquette which some women teach others about when they begin their moontime or are reclaiming their cultural traditions. Moontime etiquette can vary from family to family, tribe to tribe, and nation to nation although the common theme is the absolute power which women carry when they are on their moontime. Some guidelines within moontime etiquette speak to sacred items which cannot be touched, preparation of meals and housework, increased creativity, and also relating to traditional ceremonies. The theme within the moontime etiquette which should be communicated to young Indigenous women is the powerfulness of

their moontime which changes their interaction with others, not the mainstream theme of taboo which allows mainstream women's menstruation cycles to remain hidden.

***Ceremonies.*** Indigenous ceremonies come with rituals and are not seen as separate from each other or also from Indigenous thought. An important ceremony which 'The One That Flys Above' shares is the Berry Fast ceremony itself:

Yeah, that is what I want to see the tradition, the culture I want them to learn the Berry Fasting, when they have their moontime, it is really a lovely ceremony, they are very beautiful and that is what I want to teach my grand kids is these ceremonies that I go to and today I am just waiting for my kids to follow, yeah that is what I want to see is the Berry Fasting for girls.

Bidaasa Kwe shares she has seen a resurgence in traditional ceremonies and would like the Berry Fast ceremony to return so young Indigenous women can "learn restraint and resistance too". She also shares her reasoning:

All our other cultural aspects are coming back why can't the Berry Fast be one of them even if it is forced...I don't know about this term forced, I don't think force is the right word to be quite honest.

Rose Woman attends and facilitates full moon ceremonies which occur on a monthly basis when the moon is full. She shares:

During this moon ceremony, there are specific songs that are used, I received a few songs and one came from a veteran 16 years ago that he gave to the woman. I tell the women that attend ceremony through story telling in Anishinaabemowin first how Nokomis [Grandmother Moon] came to be where she is today.

Manitowabi & Gauthier-Frohlick (2012) share that ceremonies and teachings are passed along from generation to generation by oral means, and little written documentation exists on these healing methods. In an effort to respect oral tradition but also provide context, I will define common terms found within this ceremony and Indigenous thought attached to it. Seclusion for young women takes place for approximately 10 days, which may vary from community to community. The seclusion includes placing young women in a room where there

are no outside influences, such as technology. The seclusion allows the young women to focus on themselves and allows them the time needed to complete tasks given to them by the traditional grandmother and/or Elder. Within their seclusion, they are instructed to make a grandmother bag, which is a bag with a strap on it which is sewn by the young women using cloth or leather. At the end of their seclusion, they are washed with cedar water in a bath. Cedar is used as it is one of the four sacred medicines provide to Indigenous peoples to use for preventative health and also for healing. The other three sacred medicines are sweetgrass, tobacco, and sage. Manitowabi & Gauthier-Frohlick (2012) describe a cedar bath as a symbolic washing for those areas that have been abused (pp. 61) through research focusing on healing from family violence. Within the setting of this thesis, the cedar bath provided is a symbolic washing but not for areas which have been abused, but in order for young women to be cleansed as they move forward from girl to young woman as part of their coming out ceremony. The ceremony itself is when the young women present themselves to their family and friends as young women, which is usually conducted by the traditional grandmother and/or Elder who has been instructing them, thus far. This ceremony also marks the beginning of their year-long rite of passage, which is referred to from an Indigenous perspective as thirteen moons. The term thirteen moons refer to the number of full moons there are within one year. According the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (2010), the use of lunar calendars is logical to those who are closely linked to nature and the naming of the moons also have cultural significance that explains the cycle of life and nature within the respective cultures.

Turner (1987) discusses ritual as being transformative, and ceremony as confirmatory. This transformative approach takes time as does the transition for young girls to young women. It takes time, patience, and support from the young women's family and community in order for

them to make the transformation and break their Berry Fast after the thirteen moons. As the rites of passage is a ritual with the agency behind it being transformative; ceremony would then be confirmatory due to the nature of women's ceremonies, circles and their respective roles and responsibilities. As young Indigenous women transform through their rite of passage, the inclusion of them as women within full moon, cedar bath, and other mixed gender ceremonies have a confirmatory nature. The roles they have been taught before, throughout and after are confirmed in the way they are treated as Indigenous women within ceremony and traditional Indigenous lifestyle.

Within this chapter, there were three section which were discussed regarding Indigenous women and their moontime: There were three sections:

1. Looking Back
2. In the Present
3. Looking Ahead

Within the beginning of each section in this chapter, I shared my personal moontime story, and answered the questions which were also given to the Indigenous women. In the first section, Looking Back, the women's stories were discussed through the lens of Body, Mind, and spirit looking at the first moontime. In the Present Section, the stories the women shared were discussed through the same lens, although they were now able to use their present and conscious informed self to inform what they would have liked to do for their first moontime, if they did not do anything special. Within the third section, Looking Ahead, the themes shared were seen through Body, Mind, and Spirit perspectives while also presenting the seven generations teachings.

Within the next chapter, I will review Indigenous women from a national and international perspective, weave the stories provided by the traditional Indigenous women,



discuss the value in the rites of passage, share recommendations with supporting literature, and explore the contrast between what the traditional Indigenous women would like for future generations, and their current general situation from a broad perspective.

## **Chapter Four: Talking Sweetgrass Stories**

### **Discussion**

This chapter will discuss traditional Indigenous women from an international and national level with a focus on their current realities. I will also discuss how varying levels of accessibility and difficulty in completing rites of passages affect the delivery and the impact it may have on Indigenous women. Furthermore, I will explore the contrast between what the traditional Indigenous women shared as they looked towards future generations within the current landscape, and their recommendations. To conclude this chapter, I will discuss the limitations I became aware of during the research.

Traditional Indigenous spiritual health has the potential to be shared with a multitude of peoples both in Canada and internationally. In order to further explore the assimilative nature of colonization and the effects it has had on Indigenous women, their culture and traditions, I will examine:

- How Indigenous people's rights are recognized from an international perspective.
- How policies affect Indigenous (to Canada) women from a national perspective with special attention to the present crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada and also the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action.
- Historical and contemporary relationships that are found among Indigenous women with a focus on the interconnectedness of their traditional knowledge, resilience and empowerment.
- The importance of continuing the rites of passage for the benefit of future generations.

It is important to understand the context in which many Indigenous women are presently situated, which is within a colonial setting. An important component of Indigenous Grassroots Theory is presenting historical information regarding Indigenous peoples as a method of explaining the multifaceted stages they find themselves living within. I would like to examine their movement within this setting in order to show the colonized confines within which they

live, but also the movement which makes them resilient and knowledgeable about their own realities. This resilience has allowed some Indigenous women to not only survive but to flourish under assimilative and colonial environments. This prosperous nature within many Indigenous women include the passing down of their nations' rite of passage, among other important factors.

I will also indicate how the bureaucratic based policies are not interconnected with the organic grassroots nature of traditional rites of passage, and also highlight the role which Indigenous women have within their respective communities.

### **International.**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP] is a non-binding document that establishes the essential standards for the recognition and protection of international Indigenous peoples' rights, while offering policy makers and Indigenous people from around the world a framework to help mitigate socio-economic disadvantages (Belanger, 2011, 135).

Articles within the Declaration speak directly to the use, transmission and respect of Indigenous people's culture and traditions. I have pulled relevant content from five Articles in order to highlight the cultural traditions.

- Article 11.1 Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs ... Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies...
- Article 13.1 Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons
- Article 22.1 Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities in the implementation of this Declaration
- Article 31.1 Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions... (United Nations, 2008).

Each declaration is concerning the right to keep, practice, protect and maintain cultural traditions with special attention to Indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities. Belanger (2011) writes that most Indigenous leaders in Canada aggressively lobbied the federal government to endorse the Declaration, suggesting national support, but what most leaders have remained silent about is how precisely the Declaration will assist their respective communities. Belanger (2011) further writes there are complexities inherent when attempting to reconcile the UNDRIP with First Nations and urban Aboriginal political aspirations, Canadian court decisions, federal Indian policies, and the protective mechanisms of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Interestingly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Call for Action (2015) reports the use of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation which:

- a) calls upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation;
- b) calls upon the Government of Canada to develop a national action plan, strategies, and other concrete measures to achieve the goals of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and;
- c) calls upon the Government of Canada, on behalf of all Canadians, to jointly develop with Aboriginal peoples a Royal Proclamation of Reconciliation to be issued by the Crown. The proclamation would build on the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Treaty of Niagara of 1764, and reaffirm the nation-to-nation relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Crown (pp. 4).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to utilize the UNDRIP as framework for reconciliation can be viewed as a coalescence of viable, solution-based actions to commence the journey to equal partnership between the government and Indigenous nations.

James Anaya, Special Rapporteur on Indigenous peoples from the United Nations reported that combating violence against women and girls in the Indigenous context must be

achieved holistically. The history of discrimination against Indigenous peoples has also resulted in the deterioration of Indigenous social structures and cultural traditions, and in the undermining or breakdown of Indigenous governance and judicial systems, impairing in many cases the ability of Indigenous peoples to respond effectively to problems of violence against women and girls within their communities (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

According to Amnesty International's report on Matching International Commitments with National Action (2012), the scale and gravity of violence against Indigenous women in Canada has attracted repeated concern and a series of recommendations from various United Nations' human rights experts and bodies.

Amnesty International (2004) further reports that when a woman is targeted for violence because of her gender or because of her Indigenous identity, her fundamental rights have been abused. Furthermore, when she is not offered an adequate level of protection by state authorities because of her gender or because of her Indigenous identity, those rights have been violated. Unfortunately, violence against Indigenous women is sometimes perpetrated by the ones who are there to protect them. Also, Burnette (2015) shares Indigenous women who live through intimate partner violence and call upon local police services felt disempowered, not only from experience of violence, but from a system that failed to provide for their protection and safety. Furthermore, this lack of safety often began for women at a young age and continued across their lives. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2015) report that specific measures are to be adopted which redress women's disadvantages and, in the longer term, the transformation of the institutions and structures that reinforce and reproduce unequal power relations between women and men.

In summary, from an international perspective there is recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples with a framework for all Indigenous peoples to utilize; the question that remains is how to enforce the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples so it is not theory, but practice based. Amnesty International's (2012) Human Rights Agenda for Canada report the government has not altered policies and practices to live up to that commitment, nor has the government worked with Indigenous peoples and organizations to develop a plan for implementing the Declaration, a step that would go far in addressing this serious human rights crisis (pp. 9).

Although the UNDRIP clearly states the importance of culture, tradition, and language as part of Indigenous peoples' rights; the actual implementation of the declaration is blurred. This may mean the rites of passages for Indigenous women may not be viewed as a significant marker amidst the complicated nature of the UNDRIP's lack of plan for implementation. This leaves the rites of passage in limbo from an international bureaucratic perspective.

Furthermore, the federal government has announced various initiatives and programs with respect to violence against Indigenous women. While many of these initiatives are welcome, they do not constitute a coordinated strategy and, taken together, still fall short of the comprehensive action needed to address what is, by any measure, one of the most serious human rights problems in the country (Amnesty International, 2012). The historical reasons for the marginalization of Indigenous peoples are known; solutions are needed in order to levy the burden that many Indigenous women carry with them. According to the literature, from an international perspective the framework and proposed solutions are there to assist Indigenous women to live a life of equality, non-violence, and opportunity. It seems there is a disconnect felt which will be further explored as we move from the international to national level.

## **National.**

In this section, I will provide an overview of Indigenous women in Canada, examine how policies affect Indigenous women from a national perspective with special attention to the present crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call for Action. I will also highlight the strength, resilience, and power of Indigenous women through example.

Nationally, the total Aboriginal female population in Canada is 718,500, being slightly more than the male Aboriginal population at 51.3% (Arriagada, 2016). Also, the Aboriginal female population grew by 20% between 2006 and 2011, and the overall make up is 4% of the total Canadian female population compared with 5% for the non-Aboriginal female population. Furthermore, the Aboriginal population is much younger than the non-Aboriginal population (Arriagada, 2016; O'Donnell and Wallace, 2011; Urquijo and Milan, 2011).

Although Aboriginal women are only 4% of the Canadian population, the rate of spousal violence against Aboriginal women was 24% compared to 7% of non-Aboriginal women (O'Donnell and Wallace, 2011). Aboriginal women reported they were almost three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report having been a victim of a violent crime. This was true regardless than if the violence occurred between strangers or acquaintances, or within a spousal relationship (Urquijo and Milan, 2011). The Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC] has listed violence against Aboriginal women as a social determinant of health because it is an issue that has, and continues to have a huge impact on Aboriginal women and their families (NWAC, 2007).

Although many Aboriginal women who experienced violence outside of a spousal relationship stated that they never discussed their victimization with the police or any other

formal organization, almost all (98%) said that they told an informal source, such as a friend, family member, co-worker or neighbour about the incident (Urquijo and Milan, 2011). Not only did Aboriginal women report higher rates of spousal violence in 2004, they were also significantly more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report the most severe and potentially life-threatening forms of violence, including being beaten or choked, having had a gun or knife used against them, or being sexually assaulted (O'Donnell and Wallace, 2011).

Colonial and patriarchal values and the impacts of colonization, residential schools, involvement with child welfare and intergenerational trauma are factors that put Aboriginal women and girls at risk. These systemic issues have directly caused poor health and mental health, economic insecurity, homelessness, lack of justice, addictions and low educational attainment for Aboriginal women and girls (Ontario Native Women's Association, 2014). According to Halseth (2013), powerful, pervasive values and attitudes, and norms that are perpetuated by social traditions govern and constrain behaviours of both women and men, and by social institutions produce laws and codes of conduct that maintain gender inequities. These values and attitudes can form the basis upon which women face discrimination, creating income, employment and education inequities that have long-ranging impacts on the health of women...and also affect the level of power and resources available to women.

Another policy which affects Indigenous women is the Indian Act. According to Richmond and Cook (2016):

In 1876, the Indian Act was legislated with the fundamental goal of civilizing the Indians, and created under the assumption that Aboriginal people and their ways of living were inferior, unequal and uncivilized. The Indian Act included provisions that extended across the social, cultural, economic, political, gender and even spiritual dimensions of Indian life (pp.3).



According to Halseth (2013), the Indian Act included discrimination against women that was ultimately reflected in the 1876 Indian Act which replaced matrilineal systems with a patriarchal system, elevating the power and authority of men at the expense of women. Amnesty International (2009) reports that for decades, rules imposed under the federal Indian Act meant that First Nations women who married non-Indigenous men would lose their status and their rights in their own communities. These provisions were only changed after a successful challenge was brought before the UN Human Rights Committee.

Halseth (2013) also shared that a central feature of this imposed patriarchal societal structure is the belief in the inferiority of women by many men. This belief began to infiltrate First Nations communities, evidenced by:

- a large number of First Nations women losing their status or membership as a result of provisions contained in the Indian Act;
- the federal government giving itself the power to define Indian identity, and the definition clearly discriminated against First Nations women;
- women becoming disenfranchised from Indian status and rights if they married non-status men, which resulted in being excluded from the decision-making process, and their authority was undermined by a denial of household and property rights (pp.6).
- if an Indian man married a non-status woman, he would retain his rights and his new wife would gain status and associated rights and benefits (Richmond and Cook, 2016).

Richmond and Cook (2016) share that this gender bias has had devastating consequences for families and communities across Canada. Currently, Halseth (2013) shares that First Nations women have successfully fought to remove some of the more discriminatory aspects of the Indian Act and have their membership reinstated. Nevertheless, challenges remain with respect to regaining their property and civil rights (Halseth, 2013).

Continuing on with the Indian Act and their present policy regarding status, Gii-Zhigaate-Mnidoo-Kwe (Dr. Lynn Gehl), an Algonquin kwe from the Ottawa River Valley in Ontario, Canada has taken up this issue of unstated paternity by filing a section 15 Charter challenge.

Gehl (2000) reports that the struggle to have the gender inequalities removed from the Indian Act, which continues today, has been a difficult journey. The paternalism is so well entrenched in Aboriginal communities that Native women have been struggling internally as well as externally to have their rights acknowledged. Furthermore, Indigenous women are more adversely affected by non-registration and non-membership than men because they are usually the primary caregivers of children. Without proper registration status and membership for themselves and/or their children, they cannot access schools, post-secondary education, other benefits for the children, adequate housing to accommodate the family, nor can they inherit band property because denial of Indian status has excluded many Aboriginal women and their descendants from residing on the reservation and from sharing in the benefits available to the community (Mann, 2000; Gehl, 2000). Fortunately, in April 2017, after a 32-year-old battle with the government, Gehl won her fight in the Court of Appeal as they ruled she should not be denied status because she did not know who her paternal grandfather was and found it unreasonable (Perkel, 2017, para. 1, 2).

In the area of child welfare, Aboriginal women were more likely to be lone parents than non-Aboriginal women. In 2006, 18% of Aboriginal women aged 15 and over were heading families on their own, compared with 8% of non-Aboriginal women (O'Donnell and Wallace, 2011, pp.20). Blackstock, Trocme and Bennett (2004) state:

As social workers became more involved with Aboriginal communities, they also became aware of the landscape of devastation faced by Aboriginal children and youth as a result of colonization. Overall, we estimate that there may be as many as 3 times more Aboriginal children in the care of child welfare authorities now than were placed in residential schools at the height of those operations in the 1940s (pp. 905).

Also, McKenzie, Varcoe, Browne, and Day (2016) state that colonial stereotypes of Indigenous communities as spaces of dysfunction, binge drinking, and sickness continue to

circulate in Euro-Canadian society; as such, Indigenous children are more likely to be flagged as ‘at risk’ by child welfare workers than Euro-Canadian children whose families are dealing with the same or similar conditions. There has been a recent emergence of a system of child welfare agencies that are managed by Aboriginal communities, together with legislative changes across the provinces and territories, are among measures intended to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013).

Within the arena of violence against women and the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls epidemic, Olsen Harper (2006) writes that in far too many instances, extreme racialized violence against Aboriginal women leads to their disappearances and even murder (pp. 33). Amnesty International (2009) also reports that this problem is compounded by the continued failure to acknowledge the distinct risks faced by Indigenous women in Canadian society (pp. 22), such as “systematic racism, policies of assimilation, and cultural genocide” (Mitchell and Maracle, 2005, pp.14).

An example of violence against Indigenous women perpetrated by the police comes from northwestern Québec where twelve Algonquin women spoke out against their local police who they stated were sexually assaulting them. After an investigation was completed by a neighboring police organization and the results provided to the Crown, there was not enough evidence to warrant charges. According to Neill (2016), the civilian auditor who was tasked with observing this particular investigation released her report and said it was a fair and impartial process. She further adds that “criminal investigations are limited and do not address the deeper issues facing Indigenous people in Québec” (para.9). Furthermore, the negative impact on Indigenous women is often compounded by gender discrimination in society and in government policy or, indeed, by gaps in federal legislation and policy (Health Council of Canada, 2005).

Also, Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC] holds the only research identifying the disappearance and death of 582 Aboriginal women and girls across Canada and that there are more cases that have not been documented through their Sisters in Spirit database (NWAC, 2010; 2012). Bourassa, McKay-McNabb and Hampton (2012) report that Sisters in Spirit was defunded in 2010, although a Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP] project that was purported to build a similar database was held up as the reason for the non-continuance of funds. The RCMP database does not focus on Aboriginal women in particular which greatly diminishes the effectiveness of advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal peoples.

According to the RCMP National Operational Overview (2014), police-reported incidents of Aboriginal female homicides and unresolved missing Aboriginal female investigations totalled 1,181 which were recorded between 1980-2012. It is possible that the total number of missing Aboriginal females in their data set is different than the actual number due to a variety of factors including not being identified as Aboriginal during the investigation and/or a disappearance not being reported to police. Furthermore, "over-representation of Aboriginal female homicide victims appears to hold for most provinces and territories" (pp.9). According to Miladinovic & Mulligan (2014), Aboriginal people are over-represented as victims and persons accused of homicide: the rate of Aboriginal people was 6 times higher than that of non-Aboriginal people. According to Amnesty International (2015), these figures entirely leave out the large numbers of unresolved, suspicious deaths not covered by the RCMP report. There are serious, well-documented concerns over the adequacy of police investigations when family members have concerns but there is no direct evidence of foul play. Such cases continue to be excluded from the discourse.

On a positive note, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to provide reparation for the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation. The Calls to Action which came as a result of this commission fall into several categories: child welfare, education, language and culture, health, justice, Canadian governments and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP], development of a Royal Proclamation of Reconciliation, settlement agreement parties and the UNDRIP, equity for Aboriginal people in the legal system, National Council for Reconciliation, professional development and training for public servants, church apologies, youth programs, museums and archives, missing children and burial information, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, commemoration, media, sports, business, and newcomers to Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has now been transferred to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) was created to preserve the memory of Canada's Residential School system and legacy.

Although the current national policies and statistics seem to paint a bleak portrait, there is still resilience and strength within Indigenous women which have allowed them to prosper within mainstream and/or traditional Indigenous communities which will be discussed in the next section. There has been some movement with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015) which has given policy makers definitive markers of reconciliation they can work towards. Although Indigenous women are mentioned once within the Calls to Action, there is crossover in another section which will benefit Indigenous women. The Call to Action #41 for Indigenous women states:

41. We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal organizations, to appoint a public inquiry into the causes of, and remedies for, the disproportionate victimization of Aboriginal women and girls. The inquiry's mandate would include:

- i. Investigation into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.
- ii. Links to the intergenerational legacy of residential schools (pp. 4)

The other 93 Calls to Action would also benefit Indigenous women, although there are others which Indigenous women would feel directly if they were implemented. These specific calls to action include Child Welfare #1, 4, 5, and the Justice System #39.

- 1. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care;
- 4. We call upon the federal government to enact Aboriginal child-welfare legislation that establishes national standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases;
- 5. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families (pp. 1).

The third area which was selected is the Justice Call to Action which states: “39. We call upon the federal government to develop a national plan to collect and publish data on the criminal victimization of Aboriginal people, including data related to homicide and family violence victimization” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, pp. 4). Although the topic of Indigenous women and the justice system has not been discussed, its relevance in showcasing a comprehensive perspective is needed. Although I did not discuss incarceration of Indigenous women thus far, it does seem relevant. Public Safety Canada (2015) released their Corrections and Conditional Release, Statistical Overview report which states the median age of Aboriginal women offenders at admission is 29, compared to a median age of 32 for non-Aboriginal women offenders (pp. 45), and Aboriginal women in custody represent 35.5% of all in custody women (pp. 53). Furthermore, on August 3, 2016, the government of Canada announced a national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (2016) states the mandate of the commission is directed to examine and report on the systemic causes behind the violence that Indigenous women and girls experience and their

greater vulnerability to that violence by looking for patterns and underlying factors that explain why higher levels of violence occur, and also look at the underlying factors that could be historical, social, economic, institutional or cultural. It will be up to the commission to decide what underlying factors it will decide to examine and report on. They were also directed to examine and report on the impacts of policies and practices of government institutions. These include institutions such as policing, child welfare, coroners and other government policies/practices or social/economic conditions (para 5-7). The commission is directed to make recommendations on:

- concrete actions to remove systemic causes of violence and increase the safety of Indigenous women and girls in Canada;
- ways to honour and commemorate missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls;
- and provide its recommendations to the Government of Canada through an interim report in fall 2017 and a final report by the end of 2018 (para 10).

This national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls commission will be provided \$53.86 million by the federal government over two years to complete its mandate by the end of 2018 (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2016, para. 16).

I have provided a snapshot of the national policies and platforms from the perspectives of NWAC, Sisters in Spirit, RCMP, TRC and scholars, that speak to the position that Indigenous women face in Canada; it seems like the international frameworks that are in place to address these inequalities are not fully reaching their intended audience. According to The Health Council of Canada report, Health Status for Canada's First Nations, Métis and Inuit (2005), Aboriginal people have a health status that is well below the national average, with their socio-economic conditions often cited as being similar to those in developing countries. Furthermore, the effects of colonization and other policies have, over the years, eroded the traditional way of

life for many Indigenous peoples, and this has had a negative impact on the health and well-being of individuals, their families and communities.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (2002) submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur investigating the Violations of Indigenous Rights report that Indigenous women and children have been the most affected and have had to deal with dispossession of their traditional territories, disassociation with their traditional roles and responsibilities, disassociation with participation in political and social decisions within their communities, disassociation with themselves and their families, and disorientation of culture and tradition. Furthermore, John Ralston Saul (2014) shares that the reality of social, family, and political problems that society is so focused on are almost entirely, directly or indirectly, the outcome of long term behaviour of federal and provincial governments.

This information from an international and national level ties into my research findings by illustrating a need to highlight and connect the culturally rich traditions which many Indigenous women hold and pass on to others. The strong belief systems attached to rites of passage and traditional teachings in general can help with those wanting to return to their original Indigenous teachings within a contemporary setting. There are characteristics associated with Indigenous women's traditional roles as life givers and keepers of the water which may affect positive change starting from the grassroots to the national and international level. Instead of waiting for policy changes to reach Indigenous women; they have within them the ability to improve or maintain individual, family, and community *mino bimaadiziwin* already. If the shift begins at the grassroots level and we have the start of a movement of strong Indigenous women such as Lynn Gehl and her recent court case win, international policy such as the UNDRIP, and the TRC recommendations, it all has the ability to influence each other and cross paths at some



point. This meeting of international, national, and community grassroots level for Indigenous women would be most beneficial not only in the area of spiritual health, but overall holistic health.

There is a connection between the health of traditional Indigenous women, the current state of international and national policies, and traditional Indigenous women's desire for the next generation of Indigenous girls to have access to and complete their rites of passage when they begin their moontime. This is where self-respect, understanding the sacredness of womanhood, and women gathering and support could be advantageous. If Indigenous women, as a collective, understand and participate in traditional Indigenous health practices such as their rites of passage it has the ability to assist with bettering their lives. The teachings which are learned through the rites of passage are part of what the traditional Indigenous women within this research want for future generations. The rites of passage provided preparedness, meaning in their moontime, connection to spirit, support from women, and the realization of the importance of passing the knowledge on to the next generation. This validating experience may have the ability to shift the perspectives and realities of Indigenous women since their collective nature has been evident in influencing their families, communities, and nations. To further explain, the strength and belonging before, during, and after their rites of passage experiences would solidify their traditional role as life-givers, keepers of the water, and their belief that the health of Mother Earth is reflective in the health of their shared identity, and individual selves.

### **Grassroots empowerment.**

Although the Berry Fast itself cannot change policies, it can instil within the women a sense of who they are as strong Indigenous women with a defined role which may, in turn, want them to effect change. It may be small at first, but the more women are involved, the stronger

the collective becomes. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women's (2015) report states: "Strengthening women's agency, voice and participation in social policy design and delivery can improve state responsiveness to women's needs and accountability for gender equality" (pp. 131, 132). An example of Indigenous women's agency, voice, and participation from a grassroots level is the Idle No More movement:

Idle No More began with four women: Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon & Sheelah McLean who felt it was urgent to act on current and upcoming legislation that not only affects our First Nations people but the rest of Canada's citizens, lands and waters. These four women from Saskatchewan (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) decided that they could no longer stay silent in the face of what is a legislative attack on First Nation people and the lands and waters across the country. Together they organized a "teach-in" event at Station 20 in Saskatoon titled "Idle No More" (Idle No More, 2012, para 1, 2).

Idle No More expressed Indigenous nationhood in its broadest sense, interpreted as a community of Indigenous people who share a common culture, values, history and traditions including cultural teachings and the justice practices that permeate Indigenous communities (Wotherspoon and Hansen, 2013). Ralston Saul (2014) writes what we saw developing around Idle No More was that many Canadians, not normally involved in Aboriginal issues, began to feel themselves involved and concerned. Indigenous people massed in protest where it was not expected such as shopping malls, intersections, as well as on Parliament Hill. "The established leadership tried without success to shape or control this organic expression" (pp. 1), and the whole country seemed to be "hypnotized by the seemingly abrupt arrival of Indigenous people at the very centre of national consciousness" (pp. 2).

If four women gathered together and created the concept of Idle No More, imagine what other Indigenous women have the capacity to do if we join together. Indigenous women are life givers, caregivers, and embody strength and resilience since many have, and are, living through the colonial constructs of Canadian life. As Indigenous women, we have the responsibility of

caring for the next generation, through motherhood, or the role of female support: auntie, sister, cousin, grandmother. With this responsibility, Indigenous women are able to show their resilience as Indigenous women.

Another example of this is through [former] Chief Theresa Spence, when on October 28, 2011, she called on the Ontario government to declare a state of emergency in her community of 1,800 due to the poor housing conditions. With no formed strategy from the government to address the housing crisis, on December 10, Chief Theresa Spence told reporters on Parliament Hill she would not wait a day longer for federal action in Attawapiskat and was resorting to desperate measures. The next day, she began her hunger strike which played a large part in the mobilization of [former] Prime Minister Stephen Harper to meet with Indigenous leaders (Taylor-Vaisley, 2013). Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike lasted one month which showed resiliency and strength, not only herself or her family, but for her community and nation of many Indigenous peoples.

We can take these examples of Idle No More and [former] Chief Theresa Spence and apply the same manner of strength and resilience to the traditional Indigenous women who believe the importance of the rites of passage being passed on to the next generation. If there is significance placed upon these rites of passage, you may ask yourself why are all Indigenous women not completing them, which is an excellent question.

***Power of Indigenous women.*** Indigenous women have always been powerful beings, not only because of their ability to give life, but also in the role they have within society.

Historically, they were seen as part of a larger kinship system and community which was based on survival. It was a complimentary role with the men, children, and elders in the community. Armstrong (1996) shares that the role of Aboriginal women in the health of family systems was

one of immense power as lifegivers and nourisher of all generations. It was also a fluid role where women would sometimes find themselves skilled in areas which were regularly reserved for men, such as hunters. They were accepted in this role since it was considered to be needed for the continued health and survival of the community (Landes, 1938).

Upon contact, there was a shift in the view of women as powerful beings to not equal members in society due to the patriarchal system of the newcomers. Allan (2013) shares the idea of women without agency directly contradicts the status and roles of Indigenous women on Turtle Island prior to European contact. Van Kirk (1996) discusses how Indigenous women were viewed by the non-Indigenous men who came to Canada in the early fur trade era. The women were viewed by these men as slaves to the Indigenous men and believed the women bore the brunt of the physical labour. As the fur traders attempted to develop a working relationship with the Indigenous men, they were perplexed with the equal relationship the Indigenous men had with their female counterparts. She further shares how the non-Indigenous men did not waver in their perspective of women as chattel, as some women were sexually exploited while others were married to them and converted to their religion and way of life. Payment (1996) asserts similar findings in her research of Metis women in the early 1800s through interviews with Ojibwe and Cree elders. She argues “the status and power of Native women ... had been greatly eroded through contact with European missionaries and fur traders (pp. 21). It was at this time, when the fragmentation of women’s power began to occur.

Although there was power fragmentation of the roles of Indigenous women at this time, I would like to note that the power the Indigenous women held before and during this time was still present, but not seen in the same manner. Indigenous women continued to provide a good life for themselves and those around them with their resourcefulness and ability to adapt. This

adaptation included attitudes and practices surrounding women's moontime; the power held by women during this transition was still existent, although it was viewed from a different lens. The different lens a women's moontime was viewed through was a paternalistic one. The language surrounding a women's moontime changed as it was no longer seen as powerful or cleansing but as dirty and taboo which changed the ceremonial aspect. Indigenous women's ability to visit menstrual huts monthly was phased out by their non-Indigenous partners and the meaning behind their culture and traditions was muted. During this time, not all Indigenous women married non-Indigenous men so the culture and traditions lived on through them, although they too were affected by the fur trade era. Indigenous peoples were affected during this time through reliance on fur trading posts, depleted animal sources, and changed nomadic patterns. Culture changed with time, contact, and diverging worldviews. This was the early introduction of sexual violence for Indigenous women (Smith, 2005), alcoholism (Maracle, 1994), and dependency on something other than the land they lived on (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013).

Colonization began with the fur trade and continued with the Indian Act and its policy of assimilation. Attempts at the usurpation of women's power occurred during this time through residential schools, enfranchisement of Indian status, and the continued paternalism found within mainstream society. Sexual violence was found within residential schools, and mirrored when they returned home from others who were abused during this time. Also, removal of women's status (according to the Indian Act) and subsequent treaty and property rights occurred, while other policies within the Indian Act continued to attempt to suppress women's power, along with men's power (Lawrence, 2003). As wards of the state until the 1960s, this manifested a feeling of worthlessness and defeat amongst many Indigenous peoples. The attempt of power appropriation was taking place, not only from mainstream policies, but now also from within

their own families and communities as abused people attempted to exert power as they themselves felt powerless. Wesley-Esquimaux (2010) explains how Indigenous researchers have proposed the historical experiences of First Nations peoples were disruptive to Aboriginal lives, communities, and cultural identity formation. Furthermore, she states these historical experiences have “continued to resonate loudly into the present, and that the harm done in the past has continued to manifest intergenerationally into peoples’ lives today” (pp.154).

The power of Indigenous women is apparent throughout this time of active assimilation efforts. The ability for many of them to continue practicing their culture and traditions during this time is a powerful statement. The ability for many of them to continue taking care of their families is a powerful statement. Through all of the chaos and upheaval, there are strong Indigenous women in the world today who are the epitome of powerful, strength and resilience:

“It is the fierce love at the centre of our power that is the weapon our grandmothers gave us, to protect and to nurture against all odds. Compassion and strength are what we are, and we have translated these into every area of our existence because we have had to. And we must continue to do so” (Armstrong, 1996, pp. xi).

The power women continue to embody does not exist on solely an individual level; it exists within the collective nature of all genders; in families, communities, and nations. There is interconnectedness with other genders and cultures. This power is not about imbalance and hierarchy; it is about striving for *mino-bimaadiziwin*, and enjoying the fruition of their efforts together with men.

A women’s first moontime is a biological indicator for when girls become young women. In general, this occurs with young girls regardless of their sexual orientation and gender preference. The role of powerful Indigenous women is there for them to take hold of when their moontime begins. A way to recognize this is through the Berry Fast which allows the community know the precipice of power each woman begins to embrace and embody.

***Culture as a living entity.*** Indigenous culture is a living entity; it can be defined analogously as a flowing river which is fitting as women are keepers of the water in an Indigenous traditional sense. If Indigenous culture flows like water, then any barriers in the river it may face can be defined as transgressions against Indigenous women in Canada: Indian Act policies, residential schools, child welfare systems which attempt to dissuade the original culture and way of being. The power of the water in this analogy supersedes the barriers; the water continues to flow as culture continues to be alive, although somewhat changed by direction, temperature, and immersion of the properties of the barrier. Indigenous culture has the ability to be modified to fit within the world we live in today.

Traditions and spiritual practices are part of Indigenous culture which means it has the ability to change based on its environment. According to Chartrand (2005), spiritual practices and traditions evolved as part of Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and its resources. While these relationships may have been altered, most Indigenous communities continue into the present to practice and honor these traditional beliefs and values. Understanding this adaptation, we can use it to define the word traditional. Within this thesis, I have used the term traditional Indigenous women largely to describe the women who participated in this research. The term traditional does not only encompass those who practice their own traditions and spiritual practices; it can be used to define other aspects of traditional Indigenous culture, such as healers, artists, dancers, and storytellers. There is no one way to return to a traditional lifestyle which allows Indigenous culture to be alive and adapt to the contemporary, whilst holding some of the older traditions such as the Berry Fast.

Historically, there was an increase in the degree of difficulty in completion of the Berry Fast and an availability of knowledge keepers and holders to be able to pass this puberty rite on

to the next generation. It was seen as an integral part of the family and community life and its survival. Presently, much has changed in the area of Indigenous families, communities, and nations. We no longer require each other on a daily basis to survive as the communities have grown and changed in different ways. We no longer need to solely hunt and gather our food to ensure our survival; we can visit a grocery store. We no longer have to survive through the winter with dried foods and limited mobility; we have homes with heat provided to us through either wood, gas, or electric heat. We no longer have the historical definition of a tight-knit community based on survival; we have larger communities which encompass a variety of things: houses, schools, places of employment, and technology with computers, televisions, and telephones. It seems like these advances assist us with living, but also has the ability to be misused and treated as tools of disconnection.

There is an increase in the difficulty of accessing those who hold the knowledge for rites of passage due to the assimilative and colonialist practices within the history of Canada, as discussed earlier in this thesis. Although there is an increase in the difficulty, we can also acknowledge that presently there is most likely a decrease in the difficulty of the Berry Fast also. There are no menstrual huts or lodges built beside dwellings on a regular basis anymore, we now have access to modern materials to assist Indigenous girls while in their isolation and Berry Fast itself, and due to the scope of Indigenous people and their ability to live in far locations, the sense of community has become elongated and not as accessible to gather regularly.

If we increase the accessibility of the rites of passage for Indigenous women and girls through a type of support network and decrease the difficulty through use of modern means, I propose that more Indigenous women and girls will have access which will strengthen their own and collective strength as Indigenous women. This type of strength will benefit themselves, their



family and community. In a similar manner with sweetgrass story weaving, if we can braid the strength and wisdom of traditional Indigenous women who participate in this rite of passage, it may be the impetus for movement from the grassroots level which may then grow to effect change at higher levels. These higher levels may include community organizing for continued health, shifting their thinking toward decolonizing preventative health measures to include rites of passage as part of a larger system of health care. Although I will now weave the stories from the past, present and future perspective, I will also continue to discuss the importance of a support network for knowledge transfer in the next chapter.

***Language.*** The translation of the Berry Fast from English to Algonquin does not exist. Shannon Chief, an Algonquin Anishinaabe kwe who is fluent in her language shared with me the closest translation. The words *kijiikwewin aji* in the title of the thesis loosely translates to: *to become a woman now*. There are Indigenous language holders in the communities who share the complexity of Indigenous languages and the spirit within it. Historically, there were no words for mainstream concepts found within this thesis such as feminism, patriarchy, and Berry Fast. What does this mean for the knowledge transfer? Is there messaging lost in translation?

I believe there is a need to reclaim the original words used in our own Indigenous languages. As an Algonquin Anishinaabe kwe, I have a responsibility to myself, family, and community to use the Algonquin language to ensure the spirit of the language lives on. Another reason that the importance of language is found in this thesis, is the spirit of the words shared and the impact they have on those around us. Words are like spirits released into the air; as they are freed we can no longer retrieve them, only add more or less to change the flow of the conversation. This is something all people can be made aware of; not only those within academia, but within everyday life.

**Weaving stories.** As the traditional Indigenous women shared their stories they were at a time in their lives where they were able to answer the questions provided to them with wisdom and lived experience. The women ranged in age from early 20s to mid 60s. Using the Seven Stages of Life (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010) as a framework to explore where these women's mindsets were during their first moontime to the present, will most likely have an influence on their perceptions, beliefs, and values since they have the ability to look back on their life. The Seven Stages of Life are as follows:

1. The Good Life (0-7)
2. The Fast Life (7-14)
3. The Wandering/Wondering Life (14-21)
4. The Truth Life (21-28)
5. The Planning/Planting Life (28-35)
6. The Doing Life (35-42)
7. The Elder Life (49+)

The traditional Indigenous women who told their moontime stories can be placed within four of the seven life stages explained. Lightning Woman and Charlie are both in the Truth Life stage. Butterfly Rock Woman, Bidaasa Kwe, and Elizabeth are in the Planning Life stage. Thirdly, "The One That Flies Above" and Whitecloud Woman are in the Doing Life stage. In conclusion, Rose Woman and Lokoduq are in the Elder Life Stage. As you can read, the women are spread out across four life stages spanning from age twenty-four to age seventy.

As young girls enter womanhood, there is not much to look back on yet, but a lot to look forward to. During the second stage, which is the Fast Life is usually when a girl will become a young woman which is signified by her first moontime. She may not fully understand the implication of being physically ready to give life will have on her life as she begins the transition into a young woman. This can be further complicated by the absence of a rite of passage which

means there would be no significant marker to signify the transition, add meaning to her moontime, and encompass her in a group of female-belonging.

Later stages in life, such as the Truth Life when young women are able to develop and refine gifts they have been given and can truly appreciate them, the Planting/Planning Life when they settle down, start a family and fulfill their purpose in life whatever that may be, the Doing Life when they practice all of the things they have learned on their life journey, and the Elder Life which is the giving back to family, clan, and community stage. As these women share their stories from their various stages, the perception of their first moontime and what they would have liked to have done will change.

If young women are in their Truth Life & Planting Life, they may only now understand the importance of their first moontime and wish they would have completed a rite of passage of some sort to signify the transition. Also, with a woman who is now in her Doing Life, she is able to look back while utilizing her life experiences thus far, to be validated in her experience with a rite of passage, or be able to articulate what she would have liked to do, if there was an absence in that part of her life. Furthermore, as these women have grown through each stage of life, they may have embraced their culture, and rediscovered their identity through other ceremonies, traditions, and settings. Lastly, as the woman lives in the Elder Life stage, she is at the opposite of the Good Life and Fast Life stage; the woman in the Elder Life stage is now looking back on her life and giving back whereas when she was on the Good and Fast Life she would have most likely been looking forward as there was not much to look back on.

With this understanding, I will weave together the traditional Indigenous women's results from their stories, share recommendations which are informed by the women and supported with current and relevant literature.

**Weaving results.** For the traditional Indigenous women who were prepared with education, there was an embracing of the known. Some women shared that at this time their first moontime held meaning for them, and allowed for a connection either to spirit or other women. Other women who were prepared and embraced it, did not have a connection to spirit or other women. For the women who were prepared, they received traditional Indigenous teachings regarding their moontime which allowed for their connection to spirituality. Also, a couple of Indigenous women received physical education regarding their first moontime and shared that they felt a connection to other women, but not to spirituality.

Due to cultural disruption via colonization and assimilative policies which occurred on Turtle Island, these traditions and ceremonies went underground only to resurface when legally able to do so. With the disruption, it may be some time before traditions are fully revived which is possible due to the knowledge holders taking the traditions and ceremonies underground for safekeeping. Another outcome may be the adjustment of traditions and ceremonies through a mixture of original traditions and contemporary societal pressures. For example, historically when young women began their first moontime they were secluded due to their strength and power; during this time, they were visited solely by women who passed down teachings. In contemporary society, one must think of the logistics of a ten-day seclusion for a young woman who probably attend school, parents work, and sometimes other maternal figures do not live close. This example is not to say it cannot be done, since it can with community members, but it may be a modified version of the original tradition of a woman's first moontime.

As we recognize this, we can more fully understand Indigenous women as having the gift of time and wisdom when they share their stories with us. They are telling us their stories through lived experience and wisdom which can only be given through life's journey. With their

wisdom and lived experience they can share with us now as they look back to their first moontime and tell us what they would have like to do, if they were unable to participate in any rite of passage. These are the stories of wise women which historically were shared through their grandmothers, mothers and other maternal figures at times of celebration, and ceremony through storytelling.

The traditional Indigenous women further shared they would like to see a delivery mechanism not only for the teachings in mainstream society, but also within a society that has embraced technology and its ability to have rapid information available to them via computers, cellular phones, and also social media sites. The delivery mechanism which was shared was to offer traditional teachings, including moontime, through schools utilizing the services of traditional resource people, Elders, and traditional grandmothers. There could be a blending of the two systems; one being the education system, and the second being the knowledge and wisdom within traditional Indigenous peoples.

The type of audience which traditional Indigenous peoples would have within the school system is a captive one. Within most education systems, they are separated by age, grade, and exceptionalities which traditional Indigenous peoples could use to tailor the content they share with which audience they are speaking with. Understanding the importance of pre-moontime education and preparation, the resource peoples would be able to prepare pre-pubescent Indigenous girls with moontime teachings along with other important cultural teachings which would be age appropriate and specific.

The traditional Indigenous women also discussed the importance of women gathering and a support group to ensure the young Indigenous girls have access to pre-moontime preparation. With pre-, mid-, and post-moontime preparation, they are able to access the knowledge needed to

increase their self-respect, understand the sacredness of womanhood, and have access to and understand the profoundness of traditional Indigenous women ceremonies. There is a recurring theme between what these traditional Indigenous women shared from their first moontime, what they would have liked to do, and also what they would like to see for future generations: pre-moontime preparation and education and support from other women in order to fully understand the holistic impact their moontime would have on their lives.

Within the lived experience and wisdom each traditional Indigenous woman shared, they all desired or were given acknowledgement which affected the meaning they attributed to their moontime. They either embraced their moontime as they were prepared for it, or they were in fear of it because they did not understand or know what it was. This affected their ability to connect to their moontime on a spiritual level; those who understood their moontime teachings and were provided an opportunity to participate in a rite of passage were connected spiritually compared to those who did not know their teachings may have been unable to connect spiritually. Within these opportunities to connect and be acknowledged is the variable of women gathering, support, and access to their moontime teachings.

**Past.** There is an interconnectedness between the three sections: preparation, education, and connection. Each section's content and performance will affect the next one. When a young woman is prepared for her moontime with holistic education, then the connection to women and spirituality can exist which affects levels of meaning. If she is told the significance of her moontime by her mother, grandmother, aunts, or female figure before it appears, including the effect it will have on her, then she will know what to expect holistically. As the young woman experiences her moontime she understands it has meaning: the connection to Mother Earth and her ability to give life; she understands the physical hygiene practices that are required of her and

also of the mental and emotional impact it will have on her. For a young Indigenous woman in contemporary society where messages they receive from their first moontime may not be positive, this can be a fresh perspective for them and also an empowering one which can assist with the continued development of a strong cultural identity.

When young women are prepared with physical education, the connection to women can exist, but the spiritual connection may not. From a holistic perspective, the preparation component is present, but missing the spirituality aspect from the education portion. When the education section is given to the young women missing an aspect, it will affect the connection to spirituality but not necessarily to other women. So, there is a connection to other women, but the connection is created through physical education of their moontime. There may also be an emotional and mental aspect which assists with the connection to other women. Young Indigenous women who go through this type of preparedness and education can connect with other women but are missing the spiritual aspect of moontime. The spiritual aspect of an Indigenous woman's moontime is where authentic meaning is, the connection to Mother Earth and also to all of their relations. All of their relations include the land, water, animals, and spirits. Other aspects are strengthened, while the spiritual aspect may be ignored which can have an impact on young Indigenous women as they grow up in today's world.

For those who were unprepared, there was a fear of the unknown, with no perceived connection to spirit. Interestingly, for a few of the women, there was connection to other women which was seen in their stories even without being prepared and fearing the unknown. This was evidenced through who these women shared the information with, and thus offered varying degrees of helpfulness. Some women shared with them that they knew what they were going through, offered feminine hygiene education, and normalized it for them. One Indigenous

woman who shared her story had no preparation, feared what was happening to her, and did not connect with her mother or other female figures during this time.

Two traditional Indigenous women received no education regarding their moontime and feared the unknown, but that is where their stories parted ways. One Indigenous woman connected with other women to receive the education required to live with her moontime, although not in spiritual sense; it was more in a physical sense which limited her ability to connect spiritually. The other Indigenous woman received physical education post-moontime from her mother, but felt no connection to her and described the teaching as cold. Spiritual and maternal disconnection from a young Indigenous woman's first moontime may have a lasting effect on her. The start of a young woman's puberty is a time when she is at the beginning of womanhood, when women need to connect and guide each other to form a strong cultural identity which can help them live a good life. When this guidance and holistic moontime teaching is not provided, the disconnect can have negative effects:

I remember being scared. I did not know anything about it other than what other girls would talk about. Like my mother never sat there and explained anything. So, there was not any like mother/daughter moments at all. So, a lot of female issues I never received. Like everything, like from moontime to sex, to your body changing as you grow up...There was no 'you're a woman now', it was very cold you know.

I have written about colonial and patriarchal values and the impacts of colonization through residential schools, involvement with child welfare and intergenerational trauma as factors affecting Indigenous women in this chapter. These factors most likely had an impact on Indigenous women's spirituality, along with Meadows, Thurston and Lagendyk (2004) research which was discussed in Chapter Three. They discussed the "...harm and multigenerational effect on physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of children being torn from their families of origin..." (pp. 160) at residential schools. These factors and research outcome have an impact



on Indigenous women's separation of spirituality and the rest of their aspects: physical, emotional, and mental. Residential schools were meant to assimilate children into the mainstream population and although it was committed in the name of religion, it was not their religion they were provided with. There is a difference between the religious education that was provided to the Indigenous girls and young women who attended residential schools, and the spirituality which was a part of their life before they attended them. The spirituality which was provided to them prior to residential schools encompassed all of their aspects; it did not compartmentalize them. Their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects were all taught and lived as a part of their own interconnectedness. Within many of the residential schools, the girls and young women were taught to separate their spiritual and emotional aspects from their mental and physical. A lot of emphasis was placed on learning and physical labour. As this was a learned behaviour during this era, it did not end when the young women returned home. It continued as the young women returned to their communities with a different set of values and beliefs. There was a disconnect which was then passed down to the next generation, marking the beginning of intergenerational trauma. The effects that became apparent from this trauma was the involvement of the child welfare system which further disconnected Indigenous children from their families and communities.

This trauma connects Indigenous women through the lost transmission and lack of emphasis on spirituality from an intergenerational lens. The Indigenous women who were left behind when their children attended residential schools would have resulted in them not being able to pass on the importance of their rite of passage when their children began their moontime. Also, the young women returning home to their communities would most likely have a hard time readjusting to a lifestyle they may not be accustomed to. They would have missed the

opportunity to participate in their rite of passage which is an important marker for young women. Since many of these young women did not have the teachings, they themselves would have been unable to pass down the teachings to their children when, and if, they had any. When the child welfare agencies became involved on the reserves and many children were being apprehended, this was another pivotal time where the lack of emphasis and loss of teaching transmissions would have been evident. Although the young women themselves did not have the teachings, their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and older female cousins may have retained them. This would have resulted in the lost opportunity of children not receiving these teachings due to being taken off the reserve and placed in non-Indigenous homes. The lack of spirituality would have been able to continue as a result of the colonization occurring at the time, coupled with intergenerational effects of trauma.

**Present.** As the traditional Indigenous women looked back at their first moontime, they shared their desire for the physical experience of participating in a rite of passage, and if that was not possible they would have liked acknowledgement of their first moontime from other family members through the act of a celebration. As the women looked back on their first moontime there was a sense of wistfulness as they shared what they would have liked to have done for their first moontime. As one woman shared, she did not realize how wanting recognition for her first moontime had truly affected her:

For me personally I did not really realize how much that really affected me till I am talking to you about it now, about you know I wanted that recognition when I did start my time and you know it just shows me how important that it is as a woman to have that, you know, because if it did not affect me at all then it would not be that important but I can feel the importance of it because I am affected now, as I feel emotional about it.

As mentioned previously, inadequate premenstrual education can affect understanding of a young Indigenous women's first moontime, so comprehension of what is happening before her

first moontime, during, and for her future cycles after will positively affect her emotional and mental aspects also. This will allow her to grasp the profoundness of her transition at a time that is crucial in the formation of her identity as a young Indigenous woman.

For the women who were able to participate in a rite of passage, they expressed their gratefulness of being able to connect to who they were as young women in a holistic sense, and also connect with their families and communities in a way that added cultural value. Although the women who were unable to partake in a rite of passage, they shared their gratefulness now that they know about it as they look forward to the next generation.

As part of the holistic experience of going through a rite of passage, when it is combined with the teachings and peer women involvement it becomes more of a deep and fulfilling transition in life. This type of rite of passage encompasses support throughout, a sense of belonging from other women, and also accomplishment when the rite is complete. It is fitting that women who did not participate in a rite of passage, but know about it now they are older, share a sense of longing in that regard. The longing they have is apparent as they look back and wish they were able to participate in one, but are also cognizant of the fact that their lives at that time may not have been set up to participate in one. The Indigenous women were also able to articulate a sense of longing during that time, as if something was missing but at the time they may have been unsure what it was. It is that sense of feeling like something is missing when youth will search for things to fulfill them when it may be a cultural component that is needed.

**Future.** The traditional Indigenous women who shared what they would like for future generations of Indigenous girls and women were at a positive vantage point. Their vantage point is relative to their ability to look back on their lived experiences and use that wisdom to share what they would like to see for other Indigenous women and girls. The traditional Indigenous

women understand the importance of the sacredness of their moontime and the respective ceremonies which relate to it, including rites of passage, full moon, and women's circles. In order for women to hold this knowledge and pass it on to other women, there are pockets of women gatherings and support for each other which may be found within urban and non-urban areas such as social service agencies, informal get-togethers, and on the land.

***Delivery of teachings.*** The traditional Indigenous women further shared there should be a delivery mechanism set up for the transfer of knowledge which will allow the flow to reach the young women with importance placed on self-respect. If we view the flow of teachings within the delivery mechanism as a moontime cycle, we can view the knowledge given to young girls before their moontime in the area of preparation as a buildup of knowledge to be released as needed. This can be done through pre-moontime preparation, education of what their moontime will bring before it happens so they won't fear the unknown. The moontime teachings provided to the young Indigenous girls before they become women may assist them with embracing what is known to them and being prepared for it. This preparation will also strengthen the spiritual connection which occurs when the teachings are provided to the young women.

Morgan & Wabie (2012) discussed the importance of flexible frameworks when working with Indigenous women:

...there are many Aboriginal peoples who are at various stages of assimilation: reuniting with their traditional practices, in the process of healing from historical hurts, and also those who have not yet been exposed to their traditions and history. Given the explicit colonialism in the early years of Canada, this outcome is common and efforts can be tailored to these unique Aboriginal women who have their own special gifts to share.

Although this explanation of flexible frameworks was provided within the context of Indigenous women and the provision of culturally appropriate cervical cancer screening strategies, I wanted to highlight the importance of flexibility within Indigenous women's health

care. We can extend women's health care to include spiritual health which is where rites of passage for young Indigenous women would fall under.

The flexible delivery mechanism will be used to ensure the moontime teachings can be reproduced and passed on to other young women and girls, along with self-respect and reinforced through women's ceremonies. Since there is no static delivery system which will work for all Indigenous women in the same manner, the flow of teachings still need to reach the young Indigenous girls, regardless of how and when. Reproduction will never be exactly the same as there are many factors which would affect the teaching: the sender, the receiver, conditions of environment, preparation to receive hence the importance of these moontime teachings. The sender will interpret the teachings provided to them and then pass on their interpretation to young Indigenous women. The receiver of the teachings will process and also interpret the teachings provided to them through their own worldview and perspective and apply it accordingly.

***Multilayered Indigenous story telling.*** Within Indigenous storytelling, one can hear the same teaching or story several times and it will never be told exactly the same as the last time which makes it multi-layered. The storied layers can come from the sender who may be relaxed and will provide more descriptions or explanations for certain parts of their story or teaching, or be pre-occupied with something else and provide the bare minimum. The same can be said for the receiver of the story or teaching; it may fall anywhere within the spectrum of the sender and receiver's manner on the particular given day the story or teaching is told.

The purpose with Indigenous storytelling can be multi-purposed; sometimes it is to entertain, others time it is to teach, and also to pass knowledge to others. These are not the sole reasons for storytelling, but they are a few of the main ones. Stories can change with different

audiences as the storyteller is able to modify the delivery, message, and reason behind what they are sharing. When stories are shared with young Indigenous women, the intent is to pass on teachings and teach them also. They are learning what it means to be young Indigenous women, the sacredness of women hood, and their bodies' ability to give life. This type of storytelling does not occur on a one-time basis, it occurs over time with reinforcement provided when the young Indigenous women ask or need it. It is imperative there are traditional Indigenous women available to pass these teachings down to the next generation of women, and each to have ongoing support.

***Limitations.*** There is some question of whether the young women at such an early age will understand the profoundness of their first moontime and the impact it has on their life and will for the remainder of their moontime years. The results which were shared by the traditional Indigenous women speak to this area and believe it to be so, although they have the advantage of looking back as older women. The traditional Indigenous women who shared their stories were mostly in the last four stages which are The Truth Life (21-28), the Planning/Planting Life (28-35), the Doing Life (35-42), and the Elder Life (49+). The young Indigenous girls may not necessarily have the lived experience and wisdom since they are in the second stage which is the Fast Life which is approximately from age 7-14. Some of the young Indigenous girls may also be transitioning to the third stage which is the Wandering Life which happens approximately at age 14 to 21. Therefore, the young Indigenous girls who are preparing for their first moontime may not understand the depth of what their moontime means but this is where support from other traditional Indigenous women is important. Their continued support during young Indigenous girls' preparation time, through their respective rites of passage, and the monthly continuance of their moontime will help them form self-respect and a sense of gratefulness.

The outcome of recurrent moontime teachings for traditional Indigenous women and girls supersede a singular ceremonial rite of passage; in order for it to become permeated intrinsically the repetitiveness and constant presence throughout life should be provided. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Three, Turner (1987) shares that: “ritual is transformative, ceremony is confirmatory.” I would propose we add the moontime and women’s teachings as agency, which pushes the transformation of the young Indigenous women through the ritual of preparing for their rites of passage. The premise of ceremony being confirmatory is validated by not only women’s ceremonies and their respective roles and responsibilities, but also the moontime and women’s teachings which provided substance and reason for ceremony to keep going. It is a way for traditional Indigenous women to define their roles and responsibilities, support each other, and pass on their culture, traditions, and teachings to future generations.

Another opportunity to release the knowledge to the young women is throughout their yearlong fast or respective rite of passage and allow for a slow build up for them to become accustomed to the sacredness of their women hood, which includes respect for self. This can be further adjusted with which stage of life the young Indigenous women are in and the amount of traditional knowledge they received already.

There is no precise formula or delivery system which will ensure all young Indigenous women participate and benefit from completing their rites of passage. There is such diversity amongst not only the environment they are in, but also their level of cognition and personal appropriateness to participate in a rite of passage. Their diverse needs call for flexibility with the timing and type of delivery system.

Other limitations which became apparent as I completed this research with traditional Indigenous women were geographical, scope of Indigenous women, type of rite of passage, and

gender. The geographical location of this research was completed within the city of Greater Sudbury in Ontario, Canada which is Ojibwe territory. This is a limitation since there was no inclusion of other nations within Canada, although one traditional Indigenous woman was Yupik from Alaska. Although the Yupik woman's teachings and traditions were learned within that particular geographical location, she has shared that her present teachings, culture and traditions are a mixture of Yupik and Ojibwe. The lack of nation diversity within this research is recognized and acknowledged.

There is a limitation in the scope of Indigenous women; I chose traditional Indigenous women to participate in this research since they would know about the topic that was chosen. If I were to expand the scope of Indigenous women to all then the outcome would most likely be different. The results show that the traditional Indigenous women who did participate placed emphasis on the next generation and the cultural viability of continuing rites of passage for young Indigenous women. If all Indigenous women were to participate, the emphasis may be on something other than the importance of traditional Indigenous culture; the importance may have been placed on other areas of young Indigenous girls' lives. A few examples of other areas include the importance of education, physical health, and the possibility that they would view rites of passage as archaic and not in keeping with modern living.

Another limitation which I will mention is the type of rite of passage that was included in this research. One out of the two traditional Indigenous women who participated in a rite of passage did not do her Berry Fast; she participated in another type of coming out ceremony which marked her transition from child to young woman. The other woman completed her Berry Fast which is a type of rite of passage which Ojibwe and Algonquin young women participate in. The traditional Indigenous women who participated in this research were all from the same



geographical location which limits the type of rite of passage which was included in the research from the start.

The final limitation I would like to highlight is gender. In order to have balance, which is a significant cultural Indigenous teaching, the inclusion of men could have remedied this. The role of men's teachings is just that, the role of men. As a traditional Indigenous woman, it would not be my role to explore this area without the assistance of a traditional Indigenous man to temper the data with their methodological input into the research journey from beginning to end. Within this chapter, I have provided limitations that I discovered through the research process, the value within the rites of passage itself, traditional Indigenous women's weaved stories with a focus on the future through multilayered Indigenous storytelling, and delivery of teachings. I have also shared literature from an international and national perspective on Indigenous women, and how it likely had an influence on their perceptions, beliefs, and values.

Another type of gender which was not addressed in this thesis was the two-spirit Indigenous people; those who identify as the opposite sex or as fluid. This was a limitation within this thesis due to the research recruitment of solely traditional Indigenous women, and the questions which were asked focused more on the heart of the Berry Fast, and not on the gender. Aboriginal people coined the term two-spirit and are using it to reflect their past, and the direction of their future (Cameron, 2005). This is a vital area of research which deserves to be completed as their roles in society are equal to others who identify with one spirit.

The next chapter will discuss the future direction of Indigenous spiritual health relating to moontime, next steps from a community based standpoint, and what my thesis offers in the area of knowledge exchange and the value of spiritual health, namely the Berry Fast.

## **Chapter Five: Gifting sweetgrass**

Within this chapter I will share the future direction of the spiritual health aspect which traditional Indigenous women within this research provided, future areas of study from a community based standpoint, what this thesis brings to the new and ever-changing landscape of the Berry Fast, and concluding remarks. The sweetgrass has been surveyed, transplanted, picked, braided, held while discussing spiritual health, and now it is time for it to be gifted to others.

### **Future direction.**

As part of the sharing circle and feast for the traditional Indigenous women who participated in the research, the women shared what they would like to see come out of this research. I further shared information about possible grants with the traditional Indigenous women that could fund the sharing of this knowledge so it does not stop with this research; that it has the ability to grow from here into something that can be shared and transferred to other people.

The women were in agreement with applying for grants and discussed the creation of a network for Indigenous women and girls to share knowledge relating to their moontime, but wanted to make sure that basic cultural protocols would still be followed. The cultural protocols would be that there would be Elder involvement in an advisory capacity, and that all traditional Indigenous women who would like to be involved have the opportunity to voice their opinion in the shaping of this future endeavour.

**Sharing knowledge.** The traditional Indigenous women would like to use the knowledge gathered to create something positive in the community. The women wanted to ensure the information from this research reached the community because that is where the Indigenous girls

are who would be able to participate in their respective rite of passage at their first moontime. They also included the academic community so other Indigenous scholars would be able to use the sweetgrass story weaving methodology and also be able to reference contemporary rites of passage information.

There have been many innovative Indigenous scholars who have paved the way for new Indigenous academics to follow in their academic footprints. New and existing Indigenous scholars are now able to utilize, modify, and possibly enhance the existing Indigenous literature, which our ancestral scholars have offered to the academic community. Furthermore, there are many traditional Indigenous community members who have paved the way for other Indigenous peoples to follow in their traditional footsteps.

The existing and next generation of traditional Indigenous peoples also able to use and enhance Indigenous traditions and customs, and modify as the world matures. The modification can be found by use of modern amenities such as using matches instead of a flint, use of canvas tarps on sweat lodges instead of animal hides. It may also be a societal modification such as music with a mixture of traditional drumming and electronic music to form a hybrid sound. The mixture of traditional, contemporary from within Indigenous cultures and other cultures showcase how the two can intertwine in a beneficial manner. The two areas of community and academia can also mix together. There are many Indigenous scholars who are active with their traditional customs and lifestyle and believe in accessible knowledge for all. There are also traditional Indigenous people who believe that sharing their knowledge with others within the academic community can increase the scope of the audience and therefore, access to it.

**Advisory circle.** The traditional Indigenous women further recommended that an advisory circle of women Elders and traditional grandmothers be created to oversee and guide

the creation of this proposed network for Indigenous women and girls to access. These traditional Indigenous women would give counsel and direction to the traditional Indigenous women who would be involved in the creation, recruitment, and implementation of the network. The women who attended the sharing circle and feast were interested in participating in the formation of this advisory circle and shared names of women Elders and traditional grandmothers who may be interested in this proposed idea.

The advisory circle is the anchor of the proposed network as the women Elders and traditional grandmothers would be present to provide teaching, guidance and counsel. Anderson (2011) discusses the role of Elders as teachers in communities:

...the majority of the teaching is provided to the children in the community. As teachers of children, Elders taught them to be contributing members of their societies, and they did this through formal, non-formal, and informal education. Furthermore, adult individuals who had taken on a key role in the community followed specific learning courses within the formal and structured learning systems offered by the Elders. The authority to designate and train these individuals rested with the Elders (pp. 145).

Elders and youth have a special relationship since they sit across from each other on the Medicine Wheel. They are connected through this and should be honoured through the women Elders and traditional grandmothers advising and also interacting directly with the young traditional Indigenous women. The network will have a traditional Indigenous structure to ensure the network is created, implemented, and maintained in a good way. The traditional Indigenous women who take a key role within this proposed network will follow the lead of the women Elders and traditional grandmothers whose role is to designate and train them.

**Network.** We further discussed what would be involved within the network and the traditional Indigenous women stated they would like to focus on rites of passages through traditional teachings, create open access for young girls to traditional Indigenous women within

the community who are well versed in this area, and involve young men and their rites of passage.

***Teachings.*** The rites of passage and accompanying traditional teachings for young Indigenous women can be provided through different avenues. The traditional Indigenous women's recommendations included half day fasts to teach young girls about their Berry Fast before they begin their moontime. Pre-moontime preparation was highlighted within the results section when the women were asked what they would like to see for future generations of traditional Indigenous women and girls and further defined during their sharing circle and feast.

Another avenue for rites of passage and traditional teachings can be provide through land based teachings. Waldram, Herring and Young (2006) shared earlier that Indigenous peoples hold a sense of place and of relationship to the land and animals which is perpetually rooted in their traditions. Furthermore, Anderson (2011) articulates that re-establishing relations with the natural world is significant in terms of connecting with 'all our relations' (pp. 177). The traditional Indigenous women shared that it would be beneficial for everyone to disconnect from day-to-day living, technology, and reconnect with the routine and rhythm of the land. This would allow all involved to focus their Body, Mind, and Spirit towards the teachings and interaction with one another.

The traditional Indigenous women also would like to see the proposed network be accessible within other communities which means travelling with the teachings. Traditional Indigenous teachings can be transferrable to others as the overarching themed content can be applied in many different ways. For example, women as life givers and keepers of the water is themed content that falls within traditional teachings that can be applied to other communities in a beneficial way.

**Open access.** Another recommendation was creating open access to traditional Indigenous women within the community who are well versed with moontime teachings and rites of passage. There was no definitive framework created for this open access, although the women stressed the vital part of this network was remaining culturally viable with the advisory circle. The term culturally viable means that culture is alive within the network and a significant part of it. We can view cultural viability parallel to the heart of a person, without a heart a person cannot live; without authentic cultural traditions within this network, it will not be truly alive.

Open access to women Elders, traditional grandmothers and women for those interested in the rites of passage and teachings would be beneficial for young women and also their support systems. For some, access to traditional teachings is difficult if their families have not been raised with the teachings, lack of traditional grandmothers and Elders within their community, importance placed on other aspects of their lives, among a myriad or blend of other reasons or reality.

If there is a culturally viable and accessible network for Indigenous peoples to access as needed, then the flow of teachings may be smoother and introduced sooner than upon first moontime; it may be introduced through teachings for preparation so the young women feel comfortable completing their rites of passage and also for their supports to feel competent enough to help them through. The young Indigenous women's support system are with them daily so if they have the teachings and are comfortable with them, then they would be able to support the young Indigenous women as needed.

**Young men.** The traditional Indigenous women also recommended the inclusion on young men as part of the network. They explained the inclusion of young men as a balance and the paucity of supports available to them also. Young men who enter puberty also experience a

rite of passage also referred to as a puberty fast. There are similarities between the two fasts: seclusion and teachings, although the puberty fast has differences due to the traditional role they are being taught as men. I mentioned the role of men within my results section and the balance they share with women. A part of traditional Indigenous women's roles is being keepers of the water, while men are keepers of the fire. There is a natural relationship between the two gender roles; the fire is started and tended by the male role while the female role is to ensure water is taken care of. There is a symbiotic relationship between fire and water; if the fire raises too high the water is there to ensure its purpose remains which is to burn strongly and with purpose. If the water begins to evaporate due to the fire burning too strong then it is adjusted so the water can survive and the two roles can work together as a pair. I do understand the fluidity of roles as not being binary which is the beauty of Indigenous teachings; each person has their own role and wherever they feel they are serving a greater purpose then that is the role for them.

This literal relationship can be transferred to other types of relationships such as rites of passage. If women are completing their Berry Fast with the supports they need, the same should be done with the men to ensure balance is sought. The traditional Indigenous women who believe strongly in both roles being included within the teachings and support network also speaks about their roles as caregiver of their families, communities, and nations. There are traditional Indigenous men in our communities who are currently carrying on these important teachings and traditions and providing them to the next generation. It would be inspiring to see these teachings and rites of passages being offered to young Indigenous men alongside Indigenous women as a sign of continuing to work together for the betterment of themselves, their families, communities, nations, and also future generations.

Also, men have an integral role supporting women through the Berry Fast, and recognizing their individual and collective power. They are the ones who partner with women to give life, or their sperm itself from a biological perspective. Without this, women would not be able to give life. Another role is to bear witness to the powerfulness of women and to share respectful relations with other genders, whether that is male, female, or others defined by the individual. Men's roles can assist women and vice versa.

Within the stories shared by the women in this research, there is a relationship between many of them and a male figure which showcases their power as women and men's recognition and support of this. Butterfly Rock Woman's father went to pick medicines with her during her Berry Fast, Bidaasa Kwe's uncle ensured she had cultural teachings and attended ceremonies with him, Lokoduq's father danced with her during her coming out ceremony and prepared her giveaway for her, Rose Woman's father allowed her to stay home from residential school so she would be able to grow up with her family, and Lightning Woman's partner acknowledged her power as a woman and the effect it has on her.

These men's acknowledgment and respect for women and the power they carry was not learned on their own. These teachings would have come from someone, most likely mothers, grandmothers, and aunties. These specific men were strong in their traditional knowledge and understood the role of women and their power. This respect for women needs to be transferred to young men, as they are the ones who live with women; not solely for procreation but as siblings, parents, and members of mainstream society.

With increased and continued respect shown towards Indigenous women by men, their power is then recognized and visible not only in their families and communities, but also mainstream society. Women are then seen as viable and powerful human beings with defined



roles and less as sexualized beings, as sometimes portrayed in society. According to Allan (2013), the “sexualized violence levelled at Indigenous women is rooted in the colonial agenda of dehumanizing Indigenous women (and men) as savage, and inhuman in order to justify the murder, exclusion and marginalization required to dominate both Indigenous peoples and our homelands” (p. 30). This current portrayal is seen through the current crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman and Girls [MMWIG] which has resulted in an inquiry since it is at epic proportions. It is also seen in the justice system’s inactivity with Indigenous women’s voices as they share stories of rape and abuse at the hands of police officers in Val D’or, Quebec, Canada which were dismissed and no charges laid.

With the continued tradition of the Berry Fast for women where they understand and get to know their defined roles, the symbiotic relationship with men through support and their own rites of passage, there can be a shift in the perception of Indigenous women from less than human to powerful women who contribute to society. This shift will be slow, but as the flow of culture continues and rushes through the river with barriers, the Berry Fast and its traditions will flavour the water with healing properties.

**Sweetgrass story weaving framework transference.** The traditional Indigenous women also recommended that the sweetgrass story weaving framework be taught to agencies so they are able to use it for their own practice. They can see the applicability of the framework for program development, implementation and evaluation. The Body, Mind, Spirit aspects are culturally applicable, holistic, and broad enough to apply in other ways. The women also shared that because the framework was created by an Indigenous person who understands the history, culture, and past and present complexities that it should be used for and with Indigenous peoples in a good way.

**Continue to do things in a good way.** Although I have listed this last in the recommendations from the traditional Indigenous women, I did so purposefully. I wanted the recommendations to leave a lasting impression and also to conclude in a similar fashion: in a good way. This thesis is the result of years of hard work, growth and development for myself. It was also completed with traditional Indigenous women's contributions which came from years of developing relationship, rapport, and mutual respect. The traditional Indigenous women recommended that although the thesis will be completed that they want to ensure the future application of the results and recommendations are still completed in a good way.

The good way the traditional Indigenous women spoke of has to do with *mino bimaadiziwin*, which loosely translate to the good life. Bédard (2008) states that the Elders speak of the concept of *mino bimaadiziwin* which speaks of a 'good mind', a 'good way', or a 'good path' that an individual takes to live a healthy and well-rounded life as an Anishinaabe (pp. 190). If I strive to live by the concept of *mino bimaadiziwin* as a traditional Indigenous woman myself, that can be evidenced by many different factors. From an individual level taking care of myself physically by not using mind-altering substances, mentally by always open to new ways of learning, emotionally by use of critical thinking and levity, and spiritually by participating in traditional ceremonies. From a family level, it may mean showing kindness and love to others on a physical level and not harming them, mentally being open to their knowledge and encouraging growth, emotionally it means being a role model to them on how to live and experience emotions, and spiritually being able to participate and providing access to them for traditional Indigenous culture, traditions, and ceremonies.

Within the context of this research and future recommendations, doing things in a good way can translate into self-care, culturally safe research practices, and dissemination of

knowledge. In the area of self care, as an Indigenous women researcher, I am cognizant of the importance of taking care of myself. Within teachings I have had the opportunity to hear, one stands out and has stayed with me. During my undergraduate years one of our professors held a class at our local reserve, Atikameksheng Anishinabek. During this class, she invited a traditional Elder to talk with us about the importance of self-care as helpers in the community. He shared the importance of walking your talk; as he further explained what this term meant, it resonated with me. What I learned from his teaching, coupled with my lived experience, is the concept of interrelatedness when it comes to doing things in a good way. If I carry myself in a good way, implement holistic self-care, and apply culturally safe research practices then that will influence the way others interact with me. It will also influence how the information flows from me, with those involved in the research, how it reverberates back to me, how it is analyzed and interpreted, and then transferred to the community as knowledge.

In summary, each action, intent, and word that is put out into the world influences other peoples' actions, intents, thoughts, and words. Through traditional knowledge dissemination, focusing on rites of passage, there is a connection between each traditional grandmother, woman and girl. If the traditional teachings and rites of passages are passed down to other young girls, then the cycle of doing things in a good way continues. As the cycle of rites of passage education, experience, and knowledge continue then the resilience and strength of these traditional Indigenous women will grow stronger and fiercer. Although the act of completing a rite so passage is small part of their life span, it is important nonetheless since it sets a strong cultural base for these young women and echoes in a good way for future generations.

The type of delivery mechanism for traditional Indigenous moontime knowledge is vital and this would be the role of the advisory circle of traditional women Elders, grandmothers, and

traditional Indigenous women who are able to act as resource peoples. The traditional Indigenous women who shared their stories within this research also wanted future generations of Indigenous women to have a mechanism implemented to transfer traditional Indigenous moontime knowledge in order for the young Indigenous girls to be prepared and carry the self-respect which is part of the teachings. The traditional Indigenous women also shared that with this knowledge transfer taking place they want to ensure the young Indigenous girls embrace and understand the sacredness of their moontime and also the importance of maintenance with ceremony.

### **Future Areas of Study**

There are many areas that would be interesting to study further although I would like to discuss the ones which the traditional Indigenous women directed me towards. As this research is completed by, with, and for traditional Indigenous women it seems fitting to remain as community based research-minded as possible. The future areas of study I would like to explore are inclusion of men and their rites of passage, the efficacy of the dissemination of traditional Indigenous knowledge for young women in the area of their moontime, and the creation of a support network for Indigenous women interested in the rites of passage.

**Inclusion of men.** If there is inclusion of men and their rites of passage within future studies, then there should be a co-lead researcher who is also traditional, Indigenous, male, and well-versed with community based research. This would create a balance between myself and the co-lead which will also bring added depth in the area of gender analysis and traditional Indigenous men's teachings. There are many male Indigenous researchers who are out there who fit this description and are able to fulfill this balanced role.

**Dissemination of traditional Indigenous knowledge for young.** The next area which was directed by the traditional Indigenous women is the transfer of traditional Indigenous moontime knowledge from Elders and grandmothers to the younger generation which includes mothers, aunties, and female cousins. The study may include the type of traditional knowledge which women Elders and grandmothers feel are imperative to share, the mode of knowledge transfer, and the target audience. It may also include the transfer of knowledge experience for the receivers, the effectiveness of understanding, the application to young Indigenous girls transitioning to women hood, and the outcome.

**Creation of a support network for Indigenous women.** The last area of study I would like to share is the creation of a support network for Indigenous women interested in the rites of passage. In order to ensure it is created in a comprehensive manner, the inclusion of women Elders and traditional grandmothers in its creation state is vital to its cultural survival. The women would be involved from creation to implementation to evaluation, and possible subsequent modification to ensure its effectiveness. This may be completed within more than one study since the journey which is involved is multi-levelled and the results from each one may assist other communities and nations in creating their own.

**Tying the sweetgrass braid.**

In conclusion, we know from the stories shared by the traditional Indigenous women who did not complete their rite of passage at their first moontime that they experienced feelings of being physically unprepared and feeling fear with what was happening to their body, not having any meaning attached to their moontime, and spiritual disconnection. As the women looked back, they shared that they would have liked to be physically acknowledged and be provided with the opportunity to participate in their rite of passage. With their respective rites of passage,

the women shared they would have been able to understand what was happening to their body and experience a deeper spiritual connection with their bodies, families, community and Mother Earth.

In contrast, the two traditional Indigenous women who were able to participate in a rite of passage felt prepared and embraced what was happening with their bodies, associated their moontime as meaningful, and also were able to feel a spiritual connection. As they looked back on their first moontime and rites of passage experience they were able to feel grateful for what they were able to complete at such a pivotal time in their lives. They are also able to take their lived experiences and apply them as they look forward to future generations of Indigenous girls and women.

The marked difference in the environments the women grew up in was access to traditional Indigenous knowledge. The traditional Indigenous women who participated in their rites of passage had access to traditional Indigenous knowledge before, during, and after their moontime. Butterfly Rock Woman's mothers, grandmothers, aunts are traditional and shared the knowledge with her and were there to offer their support. Lokoduq also participated in a rite of passage after her first moontime, which was completed with her father who possessed a lot of the older generational Indigenous knowledge. The rite of passage ceremony was completed with her father, but the preparation for it was done with her aunt who taught her the ceremonial dance and assisted with her ceremonial regalia.

The traditional Indigenous women who did not have access to traditional Indigenous knowledge until later in life shared that there was no one to assist them with their rites of passage even if they did know about it then. Bidaasa Kwe did share that her uncle helped her with certain areas of traditional Indigenous knowledge such as pow wows, picking medicines, and

caring for her own regalia. She was able to experience and absorb the traditional Indigenous knowledge which he provided for her, but there was one area he was unable to which was her moontime. For the most part, the traditional Indigenous knowledge the women obtained came after their first moontime.

This highlights the importance of a delivery mechanism for sharing traditional Indigenous knowledge, and having a network of support for women. If there is a way for Indigenous girls and women to access traditional Indigenous knowledge regarding their moontime both before, during and after their moontime then the access issue would no longer be a barrier for them. The knowledge transfer for Indigenous women can be used for themselves and also as mothers, aunties, grandmothers, and traditional resource people within their family and community. As young Indigenous girls access their traditional Indigenous knowledge about their moontime, they will be able to make an informed decision whether they would like to complete their rite of passage or if having the moontime teachings is enough for them.

Furthermore, the extended support which the young Indigenous girls will have access to will increase if the traditional knowledge is also passed on to older Indigenous women; the young Indigenous girls will be supported through the traditional women Elders who put them on their rites of passage and also their maternal family members, such as mother, sisters, aunts, and female cousins. The traditional Indigenous knowledge is imperative but the agency of the teachings is also; the older traditional Indigenous women need support from each other and the Elders in order to embrace and use it in a good way for their daughters, nieces, cousins.

This type of traditional Indigenous knowledge should be accessible to Indigenous women from all stages of life. The knowledge should be accessible by, for, and with Indigenous women as it is theirs to carry and pass on to future generations. Young Indigenous women who are able

to access and participate in a rite of passage at the start of their moontime are provided the tools to live mino bimaadiziwin at a pivotal time in their lives. The traits the women instil in themselves during their rites of passage provide a lifetime of teachings for them, instill their role as traditional Indigenous women, and have them earn their sense of belonging to their peoples. The strength and resilience they gain through their rites of passage ceremony, support from other traditional Indigenous women, and clarity of their role provide them with a solid place in contemporary society. The traits and lessons learned throughout their rites of passage assist them with their place in contemporary society by changing their perspective on the importance of succeeding solely within mainstream society; they see the importance of their traditional roles which have assisted other women with enhancing their strength and resilience.

The rites of passage ceremony and accompanying teachings are important for all Indigenous women whether they participate or solely learn about it. This is particularly vital when Indigenous women live in rural and northern communities where access to government based programs and services are less accessible than urban areas. These traditional Indigenous moontime teachings and ceremonies are available and do not depend on government funding or their infrastructure to operate; it is currently an informal support which is sporadically found depending on accessibility to women Elders and grandmothers, the desire for Indigenous women to return to their traditional roles, and a return to their historical way of celebrating the transition of Indigenous girls into women. With an increase in accessibility, there would be less dependence on the governmental programs and services which are currently being used for health issues such as mental health programs, drug and alcohol treatment, since a return to the traditional roles and the agency to maintain these roles improve their overall holistic health. Holistic health includes physical health of their moontime itself as a marker of transition and its



cyclical nature, mental and emotional health which is taken care of by connection to and support by other women, and spiritual health with their connection to the Creator and to themselves as life givers and keepers of the water. This is not to say that the government programs and services should be taken out of communities since traditional Indigenous teachings will not remedy every health issue experienced by Indigenous people, but it is a step in the direction of community grassroots-based health services which are by, for, and with Indigenous peoples. This may be a step in the decolonized direction of preventative health services which promote *mino bimaadiziwin* in contemporary times with less reliance on government and more on each other as family, community and nation strength is exercised.

#### **Sweetgrass knowledge transfer model.**

As we tie the end of the sweetgrass braid, I would like to use this opportunity to pass on an Indigenous knowledge transfer model to other Indigenous women who are interested in this area of Indigenous spiritual health. I will tie the end of the sweetgrass with a blade of the same medicine, as it is applicable. The traditional Indigenous women shared in the recommendation section the transferrable characteristics within the sweetgrass story weaving framework. I propose that the scope of the sweetgrass story weaving model framework's characteristics are broad enough to not only use as a research methodology, but also as a knowledge transfer model.

I propose that the single blade of sweetgrass which holds and binds this thesis, be the knowledge transfer model which may be used with Indigenous girls and the Berry Fast.

I will share the knowledge transfer model through three spheres: individual, family, and community. This allows the reader to take away immediate considerations for the implementation of not only the Berry Fast, but also a change in their perspective of a women's moontime, whether they be Indigenous or non-Indigenous. They will be presented as reflective

questions to ponder with the purpose of continuing to open your thinking. The individual and family spheres are personal and will be explored more from reflective lens. The community sphere will be discussed through the Berry Fast itself and the continuation of this time-honoured tradition.

### ***Individual.***

From an individual perspective, situating yourself is imperative. If you are a woman, you may likely experience your moontime monthly, or you may be past this time in your life where you are able to look back and impart wisdom to the next generation, or you may have a different experience with your moontime if you have had physical health issues. If you are a man reading this thesis, you will also need to reflect on the role of moontime in your life. You may not physically experience it, but the power of the moontime has allowed you to be gifted life here on Mother Earth. You may have a partner who experiences their moontime, or another family member, close friend, or work colleague.

Reflect and situate yourself within the role you have in society, through family, community and employment also since these will have an impact on your thinking and interaction with other women.

From the body aspect of the sweetgrass, focus on the physicality of women, and the power they hold:

1. Who are the young girls and women in your life who would benefit from transfer of this knowledge?
2. Are you able to set time aside to talk with them about what you have read in this thesis?
3. Have you acknowledged the physicality of your moontime by resting (if you have your moontime)? Or have you acknowledged a women's moontime and the power it brings by showing respect to them when they feel like resting?
4. Growing up, did you see women's feminine hygiene products in your home? If you did, where were they located?

5. As men, have you felt like a woman's moontime interferes with sexual activity? Has it ever felt like a deterrent for your sexual pleasure?
6. Think about your workplace or other public spaces. Are they moontime positive? Do they view moontime as a regular part of life or is it hidden? How? Does it need to be?

The mind aspect of the sweetgrass is next, where we are able to focus on the emotional and mental aspects of the knowledge transfer of women and the power they hold.

1. What perspectives do you have of your own moontime? If you do not have your moontime, think of others who do. Do you feel it holds power?
2. Have you ever felt ashamed of your own moontime or another person's? Why?
3. How can you change your thinking in the area of moontime so it is seen as a positive aspect and not a hindrance?
4. How does society view women and their moontime? How can you make a small change to adjust this view so it is more normative and less taboo?

Through the spiritual aspect of the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model, we are able to focus on the spirituality of this section.

1. Are you comfortable with spirituality in relation to women and their moontime? Is it something you have thought of before? Why or why not?
2. How can you honour a woman's moontime? Do you believe you should? How would you honour them?
3. Do you view women's moontime as connection to the moon and its cycles? Do you acknowledge it? Why or why not?

These reflective questions are to take away and think about as an individual as a male, female, or other gender. Its purpose is to get you thinking more critically about women's moontime in a holistic fashion through body, mind, and spirit.

### ***Family.***

Within this sphere, I would like you to think about your family and the role of moontime within it. Family has different definitions, so use the one that resonates with you and include who you would like as you think about women and their moontime as we view it holistically.

The physical characteristics we will reflect on will be done through the body aspect of the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model.

1. Have you talked to someone in your family about their moontime? Who? What words did you use?
2. If there is someone in your family who has their moontime, do you know when they are on it? How? What are the indicators?
3. Where are the feminine hygiene products located in your home? Are they visible to all or hidden?
4. Have you purchased feminine hygiene products for someone else in your family?

The mind aspect of the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model encompasses the emotional and mental components of women's moontime:

1. What are the perspectives within your home regarding women's moontime? Who shares these perspectives with the family? Are they all the same? Different? Why?
2. Is it important for male family members to learn about the positive aspects of women and their moontime? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever used derogatory or disempowering terms within the family, when talking about women's moontime? If so, with whom and what was the outcome?
4. Do family members openly talk about their moontime or is it hidden?

The last strand of the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model is the spirit aspect where we reflect on women's moontime and spirituality:

1. Is there a connection between women's moontime and spirituality within your home? Are there any customs or traditions that your family follows?
2. What is said about women's moontime within your spiritual practices? eg. church, prayers, teachings, etc.

These questions are reflected within the family sphere. There may be differing views within your family, but that is to be expected and is what makes your family unique. The purpose is to allow you to think of women's moontime within a family constellation and how it is viewed. You may also think about the messaging within your family and how it affects each family member.

The next sphere incorporates the community, and this is where the focus shifts from reflection to action. This upcoming sphere will discuss a flexible framework to implement the sweetgrass knowledge transfer model for the Berry Fast itself in the community.

### ***Community.***

Through the body aspect of the sweetgrass, we are able to focus on the physicality of the knowledge transfer of the Berry Fast. The physical knowledge transfer characteristics may include the delivery mechanism. As some traditional knowledge holders are strong believers in the oral traditions, any type of mechanism which leaves an indelible mark may be not acceptable, which includes the written word and videos, as examples. Understanding the sacredness of teachings, this would be an opportune time to include an advisory circle comprised of traditional women Elders and grandmothers to guide the knowledge transfer. Another physical knowledge transfer characteristics could include the physical locations to host gatherings, seclusions, and feasts as part of the teachings pre, mid, and post-Berry Fast. Other physical characteristics include the Indigenous girls themselves, along with women, grandmothers, women Elders, and helpers.

1. Who are the women Elders and/or traditional women in your community? If there are none, then who can you involve from a neighboring community?
2. How will the delivery of knowledge be set up, keeping in mind the sacredness of the teachings and possible desires of the Elders and grandmothers to keep the oral traditions?
3. Where are the places in your community to be able to host gatherings, teachings, and seclusion for Indigenous women and girls? Is there more than one location which would be appropriate? Are you close to a reserve that would assist with locations?
4. What group would you target to begin the creation of your network? Elders, traditional grandmothers, Indigenous women, girls, etc. Where would be a good place to start?

Through the mind aspect of the sweetgrass, we are able to focus on the emotional and mental aspects of the knowledge transfer of the Berry Fast. The emotional and mental knowledge

transfer characteristics may include mentoring of young girls to ensure they are prepared before they make the choice to participate in a Berry Fast. It is imperative the young Indigenous girls are prepared mentally and emotionally not only before they participate, but also as they go through the year-long fast, and continued mentoring post-Berry Fast. This would include traditional aunties to ensure they have someone to share their thoughts, feelings, and emotions with. Peer support is another integral part of this model; the young women need to be able to talk with each other about their moontime and subsequent Berry Fast, including the difficulties they endure, and celebrations they experience.

1. Would traditional gatherings every season on the Berry Fast by women Elders and traditional grandmothers be sufficient in preparing young Indigenous girls for the Berry Fast? Or should it come from other young Indigenous women who have already completed their rites of passage? Or both?
2. In the same manner of gatherings, how would the peer support of young Indigenous girls to one another be employed? Would it be overseen or up to the young Indigenous girls to connect as needed?
3. What happens when a young Indigenous girl does not complete her Berry Fast? What type of support can be offered to her as she makes this personal choice? Is this where the mentoring of young Indigenous girls is integral to the completion?

Through the spiritual aspect of the sweetgrass, we are able to focus on the spirituality of the knowledge transfer model. The spiritual knowledge transfer characteristics will include the Berry Fast itself which is ceremony, the teachings received from women Elders and traditional grandmothers and the young women's interpretation and understanding of it, along with their connection to the Creator. In the end, the Berry Fast is something between the young women, the land, and their Creator.

1. How can the network which has been created assist young Indigenous girls with their spiritual needs pre, mid, and post-Berry Fast?
2. What is needed from a spiritual aspect to ensure this network is completed in a good way? Sweetgrass, cedar, tobacco, sage would be needed as they are the four sacred medicines, Elder and traditional grandmother honorariums, avenues for the young Indigenous girls to explore their spirituality are all good places to start, but think of what else is needed and inquire with others.

3. Would a Berry Fast kit which can assist young Indigenous girls as they physically begin their seclusion be useful? It could include all that is needed to complete the seclusion such as: material for the grandmother bag, sewing kits, cedar, etc. This would be decided appropriate or not with the advisory circle which was created.

These questions were created as a starting point in the creation of a sweetgrass knowledge transfer model for the Berry Fast. It is not a comprehensive list; it can be added to and areas which may not work in your community can be removed or modified. The knowledge transfer includes a multitude of efforts from several Indigenous women and helpers to create, but the outcome may be beneficial to your community. There may be increased strength, cohesion, and resilience of Indigenous women who participate in this knowledge transfer if it is completed in a good way with the outcome being Indigenous girls preparing, completing and being supported before, during, and after their Berry Fast.

This sweetgrass knowledge transfer model can be applied within the community as a grassroots based network for Berry Fasting. There are other options for the application of this model; it can remain grassroots with no agency involvement or as partners, it can be applied within elementary and secondary schools as part of the Indigenous curriculum; it can also be provided to the parents as public service announcements within the community with subsequent information sessions. There are many avenues which this model can be applied and it would be up to each community itself to decide what is best for them.

The full sweetgrass story weaving methodology has been braided and tied with three minuscule strands representing individual, family and community. It is a small braid but what it ties together is the critical and holistic reflection of women's moontime, and a framework for the increased accessibility and decreased degree of difficulty of the Berry Fast itself.

## **Gifting.**

In summary, I have arranged the chapters of my thesis through the perspective of sweetgrass as medicine. In Chapter One, Surveying/Transplanting Sweetgrass I shared rites of passage information from an historical and modern perspective, and highlighted the value in the rites of passage itself. I also shared my epistemology and ontology as a traditional Indigenous woman, including the teachings I carry in order to situate myself. Finally, I was able to properly introduce the Algonquin Indigenist paradigm which I place myself in, as I used my Indigenous Grassroots Theory to employ my sweetgrass story weaving research methodology.

The second chapter titled Harvesting Sweetgrass shifted into the Indigenous methodology that I used to research with traditional Indigenous women: sweetgrass story weaving. I also shared the importance of research assistance I received from Lisa Osawamick. I described the Body, Mind, and Spirit concept of data collection, analysis, and presentation. The sweetgrass story weaving tool was used to harvest the stories which included the use of an ethical space, research standards, and the importance of Indigenous storytelling.

In Chapter Three, the Braiding Sweetgrass analogy was shown through the results of the stories which the traditional Indigenous women shared. The results were divided into three sections: Looking Back, In the Present, and Looking Ahead. The first section looked at what each traditional Indigenous woman experienced during their first moontime. In the second section, the traditional Indigenous women shared their thoughts on what they would have liked to do for their first moontime if they did not celebrate it. In the final section, the traditional Indigenous women shared their wishes for future generations of Indigenous women and girls within the context of their moontime. The braiding of the results was shown in this section through the Body, Mind, and Spirit aspects.



The fourth chapter, Talking Sweetgrass began with relating traditional Indigenous women through an international and national lens, with focus on strength, resilience, and power. I shared the perspective of how levels of accessibility and degrees of difficulty would affect the impact on Indigenous women and how it is delivered. I also weaved together the results which were found in the traditional Indigenous women's stories, shared recommendations they made for future generations, and supported it with existing literature. I ended the chapter with the limitations of this research, which brought us to the next chapter.

This final chapter, Gifting Sweetgrass incorporated the future direction of rites of passage through the traditional Indigenous women's contributions, which future areas of study would be feasible from a community based perspective, and the introduction of a knowledge transfer model for women's moontime and the Berry Fast using the sweetgrass story weaving research methodology's transferrable characteristics.

I am now holding the sweetgrass-braided moontime stories of traditional Indigenous women from the past, present, and their desires for future generations of young Indigenous girls. I am also holding scholarly work braided into the traditional Indigenous women's knowledge that is tied together with the critical and holistic reflection of women's moontime, and a flexible framework for knowledge transfer of the Berry Fast for future use. It has been such an honour to work with these women's stories, and have spent years trying to showcase the importance of rites of passage for Indigenous women through this thesis. It has been an arduous but rewarding journey with braiding literature, traditional women's stories, a new Indigenous research methodology, and the start of a knowledge transfer model for the Berry Fast into this sweetgrass. I now take the sweetgrass braid and gift it to you: the reader. It is up to you to decide what to do

with it; acknowledge it, respect it, take it apart, or pass it on to others. This is my gift to you.

Miigwetch.

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## **Appendix 1 Seven Grandfather teachings approach to research**

**Truth** is to know all of these things

Speak the truth

No deception in rapport building, data collection, analysis and presentation to community or academic institution

To cherish knowledge is to know **Wisdom**

Sharing of resources and information with communities and colleagues

Understanding that I am a vessel

Hold Elders in the same regard as the mainstream hold people with PhDs

To know **Love** is to know peace

Love of myself, my family and community

Love of research

To honor all creation is to have **Respect**

Understanding of mutuality

I will always lead with respect when working with communities, colleagues and professionals

Respect of people's time and information they share

Respect confidentiality

**Bravery** is to face the foe with integrity

I try to do what is right even though I won't like the consequences

Admit shortcomings

**Honesty** in facing a situation is to be brave

Myself-Know my limitations as a researcher

Others-admitting my mistakes and asking for forgiveness

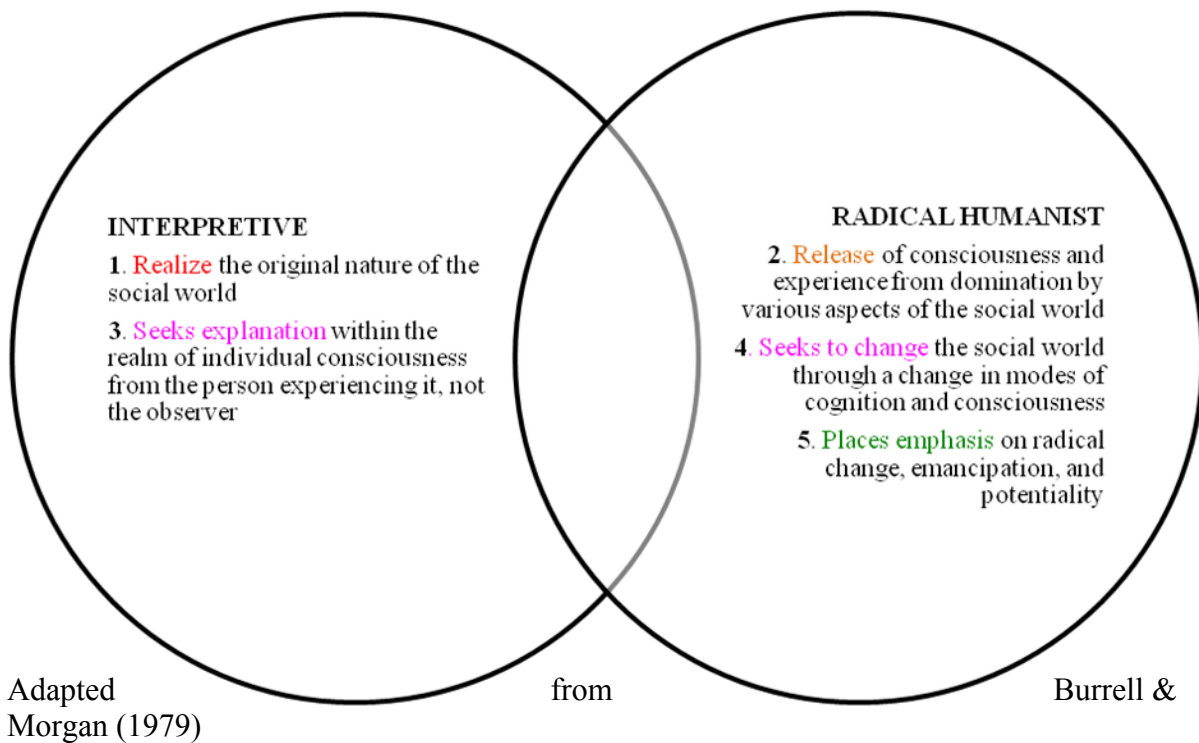
**Humility** is to know yourself as a sacred part of Creation

Giving tobacco to my participants

Acknowledging to myself this research is not on the top of other's priority list

Headings referenced from Benton-Benai (1988).

## Appendix 2 Interpretive & Radical Humanist Integration: Algonquin Indigenist



### Appendix 3 Approval letter from Research Ethics Board



#### APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

| TYPE OF APPROVAL / New X / Modifications to project / Time extension          |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Name of Principal Investigator and school/department</b>                   | Joey-Lynn Wabie                     |
| <b>Title of Project</b>   | Kijiikwewin aji: sweetgrass stories |
| <b>REB file number</b>  | 2013-08-06                          |
| <b>Date of original approval of project</b>                                   | January 2, 2014                     |
| <b>Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)</b> |                                     |
| <b>Final/Interim report due on</b>  | January 2, 2015 and annually        |
| <b>Conditions placed on project</b>   | Final report due on January 2, 2016 |

During the course of your research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to the Research Ethics website to complete the appropriate [REB form](#).

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate [REB form](#).

In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(TCPS\)](#). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations and best of luck in conducting your research.

Rosanna Langer, PH.D. Vice Chair  
Laurentian University Research Ethics Board



About the artist

Shaun Hedican is a member of the Loon Clan and The Eabametoong First Nation. Shaun's style of painting developed from his experiences and knowledge of pictographs, birch bark scrolls, beadwork, and other traditional iconography.

# Sweetgrass Stories

Are you a traditional Indigenous woman who is 18+? Would you like to share your life story about your experiences with moontime, the strength of Indigenous women, and what you would like to see for future generations?

**A copy of your story will be provided in print form as an expression of gratitude.**

**This informal interview can be completed at your convenience. Due to the storytelling nature of this interview, it will be approximately 2 hours in length and may require a follow up visit.**

**Please contact Joey-Lynn Wabie**  
[jl\\_wabie@laurentian.ca](mailto:jl_wabie@laurentian.ca)

About the researcher

My name is Joey-Lynn Wabie and I am from Wolf Lake First Nation in Temiscaming, Quebec. I have been studying spiritual health at Laurentian University and am also active within the community through various Indigenous women's groups.



## **Appendix 5 Consent fom for research participation**

**Name of Study:** Kijiikwewin aji: sweetgrass stories

**Researcher:** Joey-Lynn Wabie [jl\\_wabie@laurentian.ca](mailto:jl_wabie@laurentian.ca)

**Supervisor:** Susan James [sjames@laurentian.ca](mailto:sjames@laurentian.ca) 1-800-461-4030 Ext 3957

### **Purpose**

- Focus on traditional Indigenous women who have been through their first moontime and are able to share stories of resilience from the past, present and what they wish for future generations
- Highlight the importance and resilience of stories among **Indigenous** kweg who have transitioned into young women

### **Expectations:**

- Participation in an informal interview where we will discuss your life including your first moontime which will be completed at a location convenient for you. eg. home, local social service agency,
- Your personal information will be held confidential on a password protected USB key and a pseudonym will be used so there will be no identifying information revealed
- Spiritual knowledge is a focus of this research; it is your right to request any part of your story not recorded, transcribed, and/or used in publications
- You will be provided a copy of your story in print form as an expression of gratitude which will be mailed or hand delivered, depending on location
- You have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence

### **Benefits:**

- Sharing the importance of your moontime with others (past, present, and future)
- Highlight the need for other women to access traditional rites of passage for other to strengthen their cultural identity
- Potential to place more of an importance on informal services rather than ones that come from outside the community

### **Risks:**

- Psychological/emotional risks may arise from talking about your life which may bring up memories from the past that have not been dealt with
- The number for your local crisis centre in your community is: \_\_\_\_\_.
- You can access information for mental health services in Ontario by calling the Mental Health Helpline 1-866-531-2600
- If you are a post-secondary student you are able to call Good2Talk Helpline 1-866-925-5454

Following our interview, I will return to share the completed stories at your convenience. All data collected will be stored on a USB key in documents that will be password protected. Using the chosen pseudonyms, participants' stories and the methods used to collect them will be reported in academic publications. For more information regarding this research study which I may not be able to answer for you, please contact my supervisor. You also have the option of contacting an official not attached to the research team regarding possible ethical issues or complaints about the research itself. Research Officer, Robin Craig Ext 3213, Laurentian University Research Office 1-800-461-4030

I have read, reviewed, understand and have received a copy of this consent form. I also understand I can remove myself from this study at any time for any reason as my participation is voluntary.

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Signature

---

Date

## Appendix 6 Coding Results

| PAST   |    | PRESENT |    | FUTURE |    |
|--------|----|---------|----|--------|----|
|        | #  |         | #  |        | #  |
| BODY   | 48 | BODY    | 19 | BODY   | 15 |
|        | #  |         | #  |        | #  |
| MIND   | 49 | MIND    | 17 | MIND   | 29 |
|        | #  |         | #  |        | #  |
| SPIRIT | 16 | SPIRIT  | 20 | SPIRIT | 36 |

## Appendix 7 Results wheel

